



Private John William Baggs, Number 530509 of the 15th Company, Canadian Machine Gun Corps, Canadian Expeditionary Force is buried in Nine Elms British Cemetery, Poperinghe: Grave reference VI.B.12.

(Right: The image of the badge of the Canadian Machine Gun Corps is from the canadiansoldiers.com Web-site.)

(continued)



Perhaps the reason for which John William Baggs enlisted in Montreal rather than back home in Newfoundland was that at the time he was a student at McGill University in that city. Few if any details appear in the documents a propos either his movements from the Dominion of Newfoundland to that of Canada or of his activities as a student...except that he was attached to the Student Canadian Officer Training Corps at McGill.

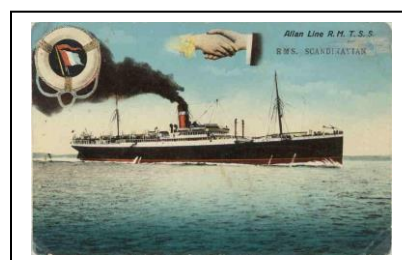
It was on January 13 of 1916 that he is recorded as having presented himself not only for enlistment but also for medical examination and attestation*. These formalities were also documented as having been brought to a conclusion on that same day by the commanding officer of the 9th Canadian Field Ambulance – to which Private Baggs had also been attached on that day – when he, Lieutenant Colonel C.A. Peters, declared, on paper, that...*having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

**Several sources show other dates for all of these undertakings which differ by a day or so, but the above record appears to be the most likely.*

It was to be less than seven weeks later that Private Baggs began the journey for overseas service. The St. Lawrence River being closed to navigation at the time, the 9th Canadian Field Ambulance was taken by train to St. John, New Brunswick, where the unit embarked on March 1.

The vessel on which Private Baggs was to travel was His Majesty's Transport *Scandinavian*, a ship of the *Allen Line* requisitioned for war-time service; but he and the 9th CFA were not to travel alone: also taking passage to the United Kingdom were the 2nd and 3rd Drafts of the 63rd Battalion of Canadian Infantry; the 3rd Divisional Train; the 3rd Draft of the Training Depot of the Canadian Army Service Corps as well as the 5th Draft of its 2nd Training Depot; the 10th Canadian Field Ambulance; 'C' Section of the 2nd Canadian Field Ambulance; and the 2nd Draft of the 7th Canadian General Hospital

Scandinavian sailed at noon on March 2, escorted by the cruiser *HMS Carnarvon*, and headed straight into foul weather. The War Diarist of the 9th CFA, Private Bagg's unit, recorded that on March 4... *At 6 PM heavy wave came over bow and washed over and drowned a private of the 3rd Divisional Train and wounded two others...*



(Right: *The image of Scandinavian in her Allan Line livery is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site.*)

The same source continues to report that the ship, escorted for the final leg of the voyage by four torpedo boats, arrived in the English south-coast naval port of Plymouth-Devonport at half-part ten in the evening of March 12. It was, however, two o'clock on the following afternoon before the 9th Canadian Field Ambulance disembarked, boarded a train which, ninety minutes later, was to begin the journey north-eastward to the station at Liphook in the county of Hampshire.

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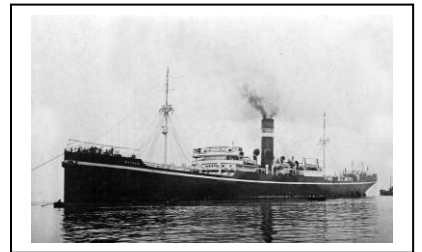
It was there in the English country-side, in the vicinity of the villages of Liphook and Bramshott, that the Canadians had by this time established a large military complex to which the last-mentioned community had lent its name. The first impressions left to posterity by the 9th CFA's War Diarist were, however, less than laudatory:



(Right: *Royal Canadian Legion flags amongst others adorn the interior of St. Mary's Church in the English village of Bramshott. – photograph from 2016*)

Men were marched, carrying all personal equipment, except kit bags. Arrived Bramshott Camp at 2 AM. Apparently no preparations made for our reception. After considerable delay men were given temporary quarters in huts. Officers were billeted with different units. Arrangements are very unsatisfactory for cooking men's meals; they messed with the A.S.C. (Army Service Corps)

Private Bagg's Field Ambulance was not to remain long at Bramshott – or in England. On April 3, less than three weeks after landing in England, the unit was on its way to France. On that date a train carried it to the south-coast port of Southampton where it boarded the transport ship *Maidan* for the cross-Channel journey to the coastal city of Le Havre on the estuary of the River Seine.



(Right above: *The image of the transport ship Maidan is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site.*)

Apparently once having embarked, the 9th CFA was then obliged to sit on board *Maidan* in Southampton Harbour for the next four days because of reported enemy submarine activity in the area; it was not until the night of April 7-8 that the vessel was escorted by torpedo-boat destroyers to the French coast. Arriving at Le Havre at two o'clock in the morning, the men thereupon disembarked and were marched to a nearby rest camp.

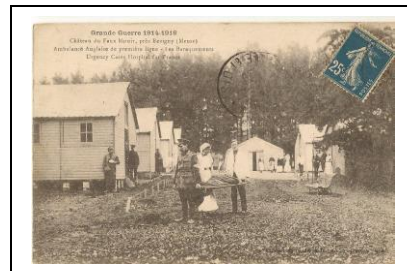


(Right above: *The French port-city of Le Havre at or about the time of the Great War – from a vintage post-card*)

A further three days were to pass before, on April 11, the 9th Canadian Field Hospital marched to the *Gare Maritime* to take a train northwards to Belgium. While the officers were able to travel in first-class compartments, many of the *other ranks* were to travel in groups of thirty in the more moderate comfort of cattle wagons. Three days later again, the unit had established itself in or in the vicinity of the town of Poperinghe. From there its various personnel began to report to their various postings.

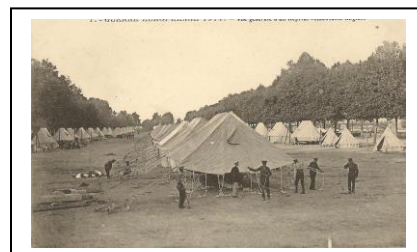
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The designation of *Field Ambulance* may give the impression of a single medical facility but this would be misleading. There was indeed a single administrative head-quarters, but it was responsible at times for a number of dispersed sub-units, advanced dressing-stations for example, these usually being temporary facilities as were also the collecting stations for both sick and wounded, further behind the forward area but still well within the range of enemy artillery.



(Right above: A *British field ambulance, of a more permanent nature than some, and this one certainly well away from the forward area – from a vintage post-card*)

Further back again were main dressing stations, distribution centres and more-permanent field ambulances from where patients were evacuated for further treatment, usually to the casualty clearing stations thence onward, if appropriate, to the larger hospital centres in the rear areas or back across the Channel in the United Kingdom. Even in these further-removed places the field ambulances at times had responsibilities, for rest stations* and for convalescent areas.



(Right above: A *British casualty clearing station – the one pictured here under canvas for mobility if and when the necessity arose – being established somewhere in France during the early years of the War: Other such medical establishments were of a much more permanent nature. - from a vintage post-card*)

**The 9th CFA was ordered to open two of these during the first week of June, one as far removed as back over the border in France.*

In one of his entries, the 9th Canadian Field Ambulance War Diarist describes some of the perils of an advanced dressing station, this one situated at *Maple Copse*, right behind the Canadian 3rd Division's front-line positions in the *Ypres Salient*:

17.4.16 to 27.4.16 - Advanced Dressing Station located at Maple Copse is situated in a small low building protected on sides and roof by layers of sand bags. It is reached by a communication trench which opens onto Zillebeke Road. Its accommodation for stretcher cases is very limited and work is carried on with difficulty owing to the fact that it is a very low roof affair. Patients being taken out on stretchers at night are frequently subjected to machine gun fire by Germans. Patients are transported on trucks along trench tramway as far as Zillebeke Road. Requisition has been made and placed before the Engineers to have the trucks properly protected with steel shields.

Considerable trouble has occurred in transporting these stretcher cases down the trench tramway owing to the fact that ration parties have been using this track for bringing supplies into the trenches. As this is a down track they are not carrying out regulations as to traffic, for this reason very often our trucks and patients have to be lifted off the tracks two or three times to allow passage of rations. As our stretcher bearers are under machine gun fire, this is a very dangerous procedure...

At this time the Advanced Dressing Station at Maple Copse was handling an average of twenty-five cases a day. In another five weeks' time this was to increase dramatically.

(Right: *Maple Copse Cemetery – the area to be the scene of fierce fighting in 1916 - in which the majority of those buried is Canadian – photograph from 2016*)



It should here be interjected that unfortunately the duties of Private Baggs appear not to be documented among his files. All that may be said with certainty is that if he were serving in the forward area, then he was sharing all the rigours, routines and also the perils of trench warfare, such as on May 22 when the 9th Canadian Field Ambulance incurred its first battle casualty:

...at 5 o'clock...Captain Waterston and Pte. M. McGurty were killed. They were in a R.A.P. (Regimental Aid Post), Sanctuary Wood, dressing a wounded man. A direct hit was made on the dug out and all occupants (six) were instantly killed, except one... (Extract from 9th CFA War Diary)*



**Private McGurty was buried in Maple Copse Cemetery.*

(Right above: *Canadian trenches a century later – some of the metal-work reconstituted – in Sanctuary Wood where the Regimental Aid Post of the above incident was situated – photograph from 2017*)

On June 2, 1916, the Germans attacked the only high ground in the *Ypres Salient* which remained under British control. This was just to the south-east of the city of Ypres itself, the area including the village of *Hooge*, *Railway Dugouts*, *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: *The Canadian memorial which stands atop Mount Sorrel just to the south-west of the city of Ypres (today leper) whose spires and towers may be perceived in the distance. – photograph from 1914*)

The enemy, preceded by an intense barrage, overran the forward Canadian positions and for a while had breached the Canadian lines*. However, the Germans were unable to exploit their success and the Canadians were able to hurriedly man new defensive positions which held.

**It was on units of the Canadian 3rd Division on which the onslaught was to fall. The Division at the time was the latest such formation to join the Canadian forces on the Continent, officially coming into being on Midnight of December 31, 1915, and January 1 of 1916. The situation at the Mount Sorrel Sector was to become so critical, however, that battalions of the 1st and 2nd Canadian Divisions were also to become involved.*

But the hurriedly-contrived counter-strike of the following day, June 3, conceived by Sir Julian Byng, Commander-in-Chief of the Canadian Corps, was to prove a costly disaster. Ill-supported by an un-prepared artillery and delivered piece-meal as and when troops arrived on the scene, the attackers were cut to shreds by disciplined – and well-supplied - gun-fire. It was to be another nine days before the Canadians were to try again.

On this second occasion, on the night of June 12-13, the counter attack succeeded: the artillery barrages, now with sufficient ammunition for the task, were well-planned, and were well co-ordinated with the intentions of the Canadian infantry. By the evening of June 13, apart from a small area in the area of the village of *Hooge* ceded to the Germans on June 6, the lost ground was retaken. After some eleven days of fighting, both sides were back in their former positions...and the cemeteries were that much fuller.

By the end of June 2, the first day of the German attack, apart from those of its officers and men already serving in the forward area, the 9th Canadian Field Ambulance had been ordered to send forward all available reserves of personnel as well as equipment – six horse ambulances, six motor ambulances and one-hundred stretchers.

Excerpts from 9th Canadian Field Ambulance War Diary for June 3, 1916: *The detachments worked all last night and brought in hundreds of wounded, so that No. 10 Dressing Station at Brandhoek became inadequate. This unit (the 9th CFA) was then ordered to open a Dressing Station in the Church Army Hut...*

...Every available man was pressed into service and the wounded were carried in all day. This was remarkable considering the ground covered...

...The Drivers of the horse ambulances from Zillebeke village to Menin Mill did their work continuously under shell fire and as this road is under full view of the Germans from Hill 60, it is remarkable that we had no casualties among these men... Motor cyclists did well. Both were hit... The drivers of the motor ambulances are also deserving of great praise. Their work was done also under shell fire and practically every ambulance was hit...

(Right above: A century later, reminders of a violent past close to the site of Hill 60* to the south-east of Ypres, an area today protected by the Belgian Government against everything except the whims of nature. – photograph from 2014)

**It was apparently much more of a hill before June of 1917 when a British mine blew off its summit on the opening day of the Battle of the Messines Ridge.*

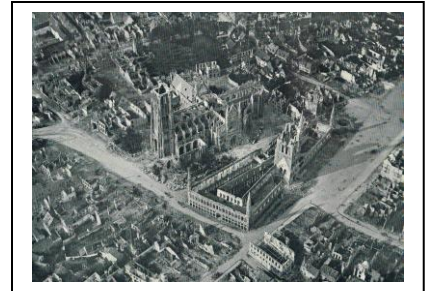
(Right above: Railway Dugouts Burial Ground (Transport Farm) today contains twenty-four hundred fifty-nine burials and commemorations – photograph from 2014)

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The 9th Canadian Field Ambulance during this forty-eight hour period – June 2 to 4 – cleared eleven-hundred casualties... *The wounded were carried about 1200 M. (metres) over ground which was constantly under shell fire. Some wounded men were killed whilst thus being carried but fortunately none of our bearers were hit. The dressing of the wounded by the M.O.s was also done under shell fire.*

In a second dressing station, perhaps the one situated in *the Asylum* at Ypres - a further five-hundred ninety-four casualties were also tended while more wounded were evacuated from the field by 9th Canadian Field Ambulance personnel to be treated by the 10th CFA.



(Right: *An aerial photograph, taken in July of 1915, which shows the shell of the medieval city of Ypres, an image entitled Ypres-la-Morte (Ypres the Dead) – By the end of the conflict there was little left standing. – from Illustration*)

Altogether two-hundred seven officers and men of the unit had served during those critical hours, and many of them, particularly surgical staff, were to continue to do so for the next number of days as well.

While at the front the situation for the most part had stabilized – there was to be that German attack at *Hooge* on July 6 when the enemy detonated a mine under, and then captured what remained of, the Canadian positions – and the work of the field ambulances was reduced - relatively: treating newly-arrived casualties, evacuating wounded and sick to the rear, opening Divisional rest stations, closing certain facilities to open new ones elsewhere and thus transferring personnel, and re-supplying and re-organizing for what was to come.

What was to come was revealed at the 9th Canadian Field Ambulance H.Q. near Poperinghe on June 11: ...Received secret orders that an attack was to be made at 1.30 A.M. 12th*, and warned to be ready for extra work. ...open up Dressing Station at Brandhoek...detachment of men to increase strength of unit at Zillebeke Bund... Our transport handed over to No. 10 Field Ambulance to help in evacuation – this last order later rescinded (War Diary excerpt from entry of that day).

**In fact it was on 1.30 A.M. on the 13th.*

The attack went in in the very early hours of June 13 after a short but extremely heavy – and effective – barrage. The War Diary entry of the day cites: *All day of 12th* June our bearers were plying between Zillebeke Bund and Menin Mill under heavy fire and in pouring rain, with mud often up to the knees. In this twenty-four hours, 400...casualties were evacuated to the dressing station**...a distance of 1200 M (metres).*

**In fact the 13th*

***These words inserted by the author as the War Diary at this point is blank.*

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Despite having been driven back to the positions from where they had attacked on June 2, the German artillery was still making life difficult for the Canadians, a rule to which the 9th CFA personnel and its facilities operating at the front were no exception:

(Extract from War Diary entry for June 14, 1916) The road from Shrapnel corner to Transport farm is in a terrible condition owing to shell holes. Our horse ambulances had much difficulty and two of them had springs broken. Our dug outs were heavily shelled in the afternoon and a neighbouring dug out was demolished injuring all five occupants. During this time mud and bits of shrapnel entered our A.D.S. several times, and the same is true of the room taken over in Ypres by our squad.

The struggle for *Mount Sorrel* was, nonetheless, now over and the fighting, reduced mainly to artillery duels, tapered off as the days passed. By June 18 the War Diarist was reporting on the day's Church Parade; and on the morrow... *Nothing unusual today. Very quiet.*

*Nothing of interest...Very quiet...*and an almost daily weather report was the lot of Private Baggs' unit throughout the remainder of June, then July and into the month of August. Not that there was no hospital work to be undertaken: while there was little concerted infantry activity, enemy artillery and snipers continued to ensure a steady trickle of casualties. To this, in August, particularly in the ruins of Ypres itself, was to be added an accelerated use of gas – by both sides - now beginning to be delivered by artillery shells.

The War Diarist describes a scene, the aftermath of a gas-attack, at the 3rd Canadian Casualty Station situated at the Rémy Sidings to the south of Poperinghe, an experience with which Private Baggs was likely familiar: *(Extract from War Diary entry of August 9, 1916) No. 3 C.C.S. was visited by O.C. and Capt. Turner. They had 168 cases there with over 30 deaths. The scene there will never be forgotten. The anxious expression of faces, the paller (sic) coupled with cyanosis of lips, the restlessness, the low moaning cry, the frequent coughing, (not much expectoration) and vomiting, the urgent...rapid abdominal breathing made a picture truly terrible.*

On August 22 the entire 9th Canadian Field Ambulance, having handed over its facilities and responsibilities to the 10th CFA, marched some fifteen kilometres westward from Poperinghe, across the Franco-Belgian frontier, to the vicinity of the community of Steenvoorde, there to take over a small camp – and twenty-two patients - from the 11th CFA. On the following day a further fifty-four charges arrived.



(Right above: A part of Lijssenhoek Military Cemetery which was the main burial ground for the many medical facilities established at the Rémy Sidings. It is likely that the thirty gassed victims of the above-described incident are among the just fewer than eleven-thousand victims of the Great War who are buried here. – photograph from 2016)

This change of venue was to be of a temporary nature. At nine o'clock in the evening of September 7 the unit began to march to not-too-distant Esquelbecq, arriving there some five hours later. There Private Baggs and his unit boarded a train. Leaving at half-past four in the morning, by early afternoon on September 8, it had arrived at the station in Conteville, in the French *Département de la Somme*.

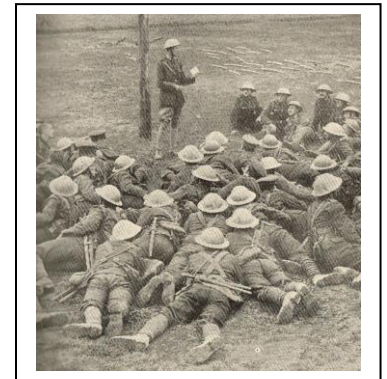
By that September of 1916, the *First Battle of the Somme* had been ongoing for two months. It had begun with the disastrous attack of July 1, an assault which had cost the British Army fifty-seven thousand casualties – in the short span of only four hours - of which some nineteen-thousand dead.

On that first day of *1st Somme*, all but two small units of the attacking divisions had been comprised of troops from the British Isles, those exceptions being the two-hundred men of the Bermuda Rifles serving in the Lincolnshire Regiment, and the eight-hundred personnel of the *1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment* which was to lose so heavily on that July 1 at Beaumont-Hamel.



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

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



(Right: *An image purporting to be that of a Canadian officer giving instructions to those under his command prior to the attack at Flers-Courcellette (see below), September 1916. – from The War Illustrated*)

After a day of rest, the *9th Canadian Field Ambulance* had then marched for the best part of three days to its destination at Vadencourt, some fifteen kilometres to the west of the remnants of the provincial town of Albert. The *9th* had been scheduled to take over the facilities – all under canvas – of the *4th CFA* in an area deemed capable of accommodating five-hundred patients. Situated in a valley surrounded by trees, apparently its only shortcoming was a lack of sanitation which, according to the War Diarist, was to be tackled as of the afternoon of the same September 12.

This was *presumed* to be the site of the main camp and also the headquarters of the *9th CFA* for the coming days and weeks There were, of course, as had been the case in Belgium, other facilities to be established, manned and put into service in areas much closer to the front. To this end, on the next day, September 13, the stretcher-bearers, three horse ambulances and two water-carts were sent to the *Brickfields Camp* in close proximity to Albert and two officers sent forward to the advanced dressing station at *the Quarries* on the Albert-Bapaume Road.

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If Private Baggs had been one of those initially designated to serve at Vadencourt, his expectations – and those of others – were to be quashed on the afternoon of that September 13. Orders were now received for the *entire* unit to be based at *Brickfields Camp*, there to take over facilities - part of a large tent - to be used for stretcher cases - and for the transfer to take place forthwith.

Thus on the following morning, the remaining two officers, one-hundred ten other ranks, two horse-ambulances and two water-carts marched from Vadencourt to *Brickfields* – arriving there about mid-day – there ...*took over half the tent. Our space in this is about 40 ft. x 40 ft. and is well suited for our needs. It is lighted by electricity. The other half of the tent is used by No. 4 Cdn. Field Ambulance for walking cases.* (Excerpt from War Diary entry for September 14, 1916)

As for the advanced dressing station at *the Quarries*, this ...*is a large deep German dug-out about 20 feet underground. The stairs leading down are of wood. There are two rooms which connect with other large rooms. These dug-outs appear to be in connection with a more or less destroyed trench. We occupy several for our personnel...* (Excerpt from War Diary entry for September 14, 1916)

As has already been seen, September 15 was the date on which a general offensive began. It was an affair comprising Anzac and British troops, as well as the newly-arrived – and still-arriving – Canadians. At midnight of September 14-15 the first casualties began to arrive and by noon the 9th CFA had tended to ...*two Officers, 46 other ranks and 3 prisoners.* By noon of the 16th a further four-hundred twenty-seven casualties had passed through.



(Right above: *Evacuating wounded in hand-carts from the forward area of the Somme, a part of the work of a field ambulance – from Illustration*)

One of the many duties of the field-ambulance personnel was that of stretcher-bearer; undoubtedly Private Baggs was to play this role on more than one occasion: (Excerpt from War Diary of September 16, 1916) *The method of evacuating the wounded after the advance was by a long carry of 1000 to 2000 yards over shell holes. Confluent small-pox describes these shell-hole better than anything else. The stretcher squads carry small white flags and these are fairly well respected. The carrying is all done in the open and exposed to German view. The patients are then put on a tram car capable of holding two stretcher cases and hauled about 800 to 1000 yards to the motor ambulances at the Bapaume Road near Pozieres. A horse hauls the tram by day; the men pull it at night.*

The work of the 9th CFA continued in a like manner – although perhaps at a less frantic cadence after the conclusion of the offensive – until September 25 when the entire unit, with the exception of certain personnel seconded to other facilities, retired to the vicinity of Warloy some dozen kilometres to the north-west of Albert.



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(Preceding page: *Stretcher-bearers advancing with the infantry somewhere and at some time during the First Battle of the Somme – from Illustration*)

During this period, the Commanding Officer of the 9th CFA recorded the following incident in the unit's War Diary*: *Everything very quiet in this camp. Received news early this morning that #530507 – Pte. Wilmer C. Armstrong** was killed last night. A shell struck a ration party going up and stretcher bearers were called. The squad of which Armstrong was a member went to their help. A Sergeant of the C.M.R. (Canadian Mounted Rifles) was on a stretcher with a broken leg. A shell exploded and Armstrong leaned over the patient, a portion of the shell struck him in the back and he died in three minutes. The Sergeant said, - "Well that boy gave his life for me."*

**Apparently, in the case of the 9th CFA, it was he, Lieutenant Colonel C.A. Peters, who was the author of the daily entries in the journal.*

***Private Wilmer Coulter Armstrong is buried in Albert Communal Cemetery Extension: Grave reference I.P.43.*



(Right top: *Albert Communal Cemetery Extension within the bounds of which lies Private Wilmer Coulter Armstrong – photograph from 1915*)

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

On October 3, Private Bagg's unit moved from Warloy to Val-de-Maison, there to take over the rest station from the 8th CFA where about two-hundred patients were lodged in barns, in farm house and in tents. The Ambulance personnel was reported as having been kept very busy, particularly with sick parades and minor illnesses.

This was to be the 9th Canadian Field Ambulance's final posting during the *First Battle of the Somme*. Then began a nine-day march, to pass to the west of the city of Arras and then beyond, to the area of Mont St-Éloi and Écoivres. There Private Bagg's unit took over the duties of an advanced dressing station and also of a main dressing station from the British 2/4th London Ambulance.



(Right above and right: *The village of St-Éloi, adjacent to Écoivres, at an early period of the Great War and again a century later - The ruins of the Abbey St-Éloi – destroyed in 1793 – are visible in both images. – from Le Miroir and (colour) from 2016*)



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For the following weeks much was done to ameliorate the new surrounds in which the 9th Canadian Field Ambulance found itself operating, and also of the six aid posts, of the advanced dressing station and of the two collecting stations for which it was also responsible. This was not to be a temporary posting and winter was only a month or so hence: working parties and carrying-parties were thus often the order of the day for such things as construction and enlargement of dug-outs, installation of sanitation, laying of tram-lines; evacuation plans both to and from the various posts and facilities were planned on paper to be then constructed on – and under – the ground; certain officers and men were sent on various courses; others were transferred more permanently and newcomers welcomed; an elderly civilian was knocked down and killed by one of the unit's motor ambulances; fewer battle casualties were incurred but the sickness rate increased; a shortage of fuel for the huts of personnel was to render life difficult...

And then the rain, followed by colder weather and by snow made it clear that winter had arrived on the Western Front.

(Right: A carrying-party loading up – one of the duties of personnel not serving in the front lines: The head-strap was an idea adapted from the aboriginal peoples of North America. – from *Le Miroir*)



There was a Christmas dinner prepared and waited on by the sergeants for those *other ranks* not on duty at the ADS or other posts – in *their* case it was served on St. Stephen's Day, two days later. The officers had their own repast on the evening of Christmas Day before it was back to the daily grind on Boxing Day.

By this time the Canadian Corps had settled into the sectors for which it was now becoming responsible, from Béthune in the north and from there almost to the city of Arras in the south.

(Right: A detachment of Canadian troops going forward during the winter of 1916-1917 – from *Illustration*)



There was to be little if any concerted infantry activity during the winter of 1916-1917 apart from the constant patrolling and the occasional raids by both sides. This latter activity was encouraged by the High Command who felt it to be a morale booster which also kept the troops in the right offensive frame of mind – the troops who were ordered to carry them out in general loathed these operations. The casualties ensuing from these activities, plus the omnipresent shell- and sniper-fire ensured work for the medical services which were also coping with numerous cases of tonsillitis, influenza, bronchitis and pneumonia – and at times tuberculosis - conjunctivitis, scabies, trench-foot and frost-bite, venereal disease, debility, the list goes on...as well as the standard cuts, bumps and bruises.

On January 3 of the New Year, 1917, the 9th Canadian Field Ambulance was transferred to the Divisional Rest Station at Haute-Avesnes, in the same general area as Écoivres-St-Éloi but a little further to the west. Awaiting the unit at the DRS were two-hundred thirty-five sick military personnel.

This posting to Haute-Avesnes was to last nineteen days. From there the unit was ordered to Camblineul on January 22: it was to be a return to the vicinity of Écoivres-St-Éloi. Another move came about on February 13, to the coal-mining town of Auchel where the Ambulance occupied a part of a boys' school complete with burst pipes.

One further transfer awaited the 9th Canadian Field Ambulance, this coming on March 8 when the unit was transferred from Auchel to Villers-au-Bois, to the south and somewhat closer to the forward area, close enough for the village to have been destroyed by gun-fire by this time. From that date until the final week of the month of July the unit was to remain there, at Villers-au-Bois*, by far the large majority of the days spent there being recorded by the War Diarist as *routine*.

Except, that is, for Easter Monday, April 9, 1917, and the few days that followed.

**During the latter part of this posting, additional responsibilities were to come its way which will be covered below. And, as ever, the 9th Canadian Field Ambulance supplied personnel – not only for medical purposes but also for construction and consolidation - for an advanced dressing station, a collecting post, and several regimental aid posts.*

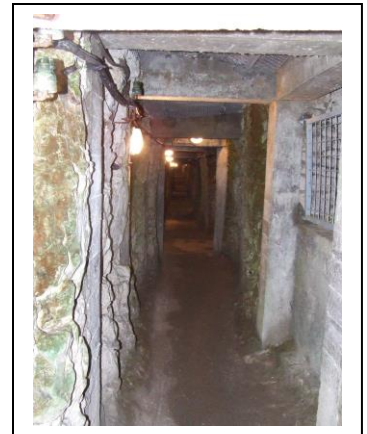
On that April 9 of 1917 the British Army launched an offensive not only at Vimy Ridge, but also in a large area to the north of the Somme battlefields of the previous year; this was the *Battle of Arras*, intended to support a French effort elsewhere. In terms of the count of casualties, some four thousand per day, it was to be the most expensive operation of the *Great War* for the British, one of the few positive episodes being that Canadian assault of Vimy Ridge on the opening day of the battle, Easter Monday.



While the British campaign proved was an overall disappointment, the French offensive proved to be a disaster.

(Right: *One of the few remaining galleries – Grange Tunnel - still open to the public at Vimy one hundred years later – photograph from 2008(?)*)

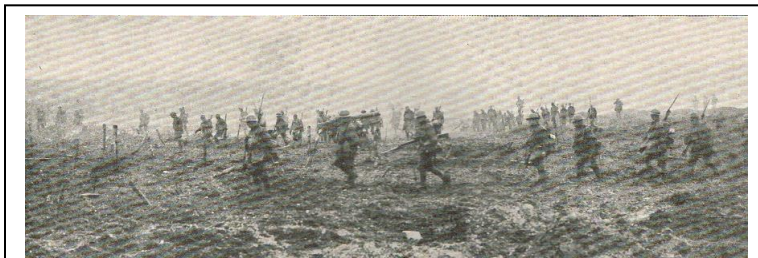
On that April 9, in driving snow, the four Canadian Divisions, for the first time acting as a single, autonomous entity, stormed the slope of Vimy Ridge, by the end of the next day having cleared it almost entirely of its German occupants.



The attack on Vimy Ridge had taken place on the opening day of the five-week-long *Battle of Arras*. The days and weeks that followed were to be less auspicious than had been April 9 and 10, and the realities of life in the trenches took hold once more. That early success was not to be repeated until the summer of 1918.

(continued)

(Right: Canadian troops of the 4th or 3^d Division, equipped – or burdened - with all the paraphernalia of war, on the advance across No-Man’s-Land during the attack at Vimy Ridge on either April 9 or 10 of 1917 - from Illustration)



(Excerpts from 9th Canadian Field Ambulance War Diary entries for April 9, 10 and 11, 1917)

9.4.17 - Heavy bombardment from 5.30 to 6.30 a.m. Wounded began arriving at this station at about 9.00 a.m. All stations working to capacity... Evacuation by lorries (all walking wounded)... Books closed at 3.00 a.m. on 10th to allow of Daily State of Sick and Wounded to be made up. Total admitted 2807 from 7 a.m. 9th to 3 a.m. 10th.



(Right above: Wounded were also evacuated by tram-line and light-railway systems which were built right behind the advancing troops. As seen here, at times prisoners aided with the evacuation – and enemy wounded were reportedly evacuated at the same time. – from Illustration)

10.4.17 – Wounded admitted during the night were comparatively few in number, but during the day large numbers were coming down. Total admitted from 7 a.m. 10th to 7 a.m. 11th – 821

11.4.17 - ...Casualties coming in intermittently, not very numerous – 341 in 24 hours, many of them sick. Because of so many of our personnel being on duty away from the station and the lessened number of casualties, two dressing station huts were closed; of the two left running, one was arranged for the dressing of wounds (stretcher and walking cases) and kept open day and night with a double duty squad for relief. The other (Medical inspection) was open from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.



(Right above: Villers Station Cemetery wherein lie many Canadians from the campaigns of the spring and summer of 1917; one-thousand two-hundred eight British and Empire (Commonwealth) dead are buried here as well as thirty-two of their former adversaries. – photograph from 2017)

By April 14, as the conflict turned once more into a stalemate, many of the medical facilities were ordered to be closed, for the evacuation lorries to be dismissed, and for the station at Villers-au-Bois to be run ...only for local sick and straggling wounded. The Main Dressing Station at Neuville St-Vaast was assigned to another unit while existence at the 9th CFA once more began to revert to ...routine.

(continued)

This reprieve was not, however, to last very long. On April 22, three officers and fifty *other ranks* were despatched from Villers-au-Bois to the advanced dressing station at La Chaudière (see below); next, on May 5, the 9th CFA was ordered to take over control of the main dressing station at nearby Neuville St-Vaast and also its adjunct posts*. Six days later again a further detachment of two officers and sixty-three other ranks were ordered to commence the establishment of a further main dressing station at Neuville St-Vaast.



**On the other hand it was to relinquish the station at Villers-au-Bois although it appears that the personnel not directly involved were to remain billeted in quarters in the area of the village.*

(Right above: From La Chaudière which lies on the Douai Plain one sees a part of Vimy Ridge – the Canadian National Memorial is to be perceived standing atop it - which dominates the entire area. Two weeks prior to the posting of 9th CFA personnel to the advanced dressing station there, the village of La Chaudière had been in German-occupied territory. – photograph from 2015)*

**Many Canadians, and others, refer simply to Vimy when speaking about Vimy Ridge (la Crête de Vimy). Down the slope on the far side, on the Douai Plain, stands Vimy, the village, a heap of rubble by 1917.*

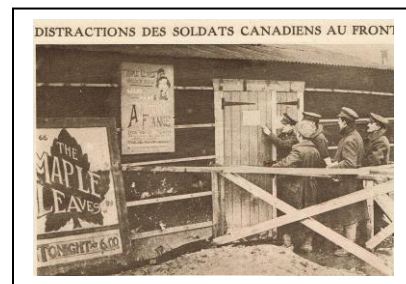


(Right: A re-constructed Vimy, the village, in the shadow of the Ridge, a century later – photograph from 2015)

Private Baggs may well have served in one of those above-mentioned detachments, but there appears nothing in his documents which offers any further information. The same documents *do* record, however, that not long after these dates, on May 29, he was granted ten days' leave in the French capital city. Including time allowed for travel, he was not to report back to his unit from Paris until June 11.

Private Baggs returned to a 9th CFA little-changed from when he had left it. June 9 had been a busy day as the 7th Canadian Infantry Brigade had mounted a raid in the sector of the Lens-Arras railway and there had therefore been abnormal number of casualties to deal with. But less than twenty-four hours afterwards the final casualty had been forwarded from treatment and Private Baggs had come back to a normal day in the same surrounds that he had left.

The beginning of July saw more shuffling of responsibilities with other Canadian field ambulances and the War Diary also reports an increase in the amount of time devoted to distractions such as sports and concerts. Raids by Canadian forces were on the increase – see below – but it was all in all a quiet time.



(continued)

(Preceding page: *Canadian soldiers in front of a temporary theatre peruse the attractions of an upcoming concert. – from Le Miroir*)

The British High Command was by this time already planning to undertake a summer offensive in the Ypres Salient, Belgium. Thus, in order to divert German attention from this area – and also his reserves - it had also ordered operations to take place in the sectors of the front running north-south from Béthune to Lens.



(Right above: *An example of the conditions under which the troops were ordered to fight in the area of Lens during the summer of 1917 – from Miroir*)

The Canadians were to be a major contributor to this effort, the incident probably best known to students of Canadian military history being the assault of August 15 on the so-named *Hill 70*. The attack was to be, in fact, the responsibility of the Canadian 1st and 2nd Divisions, thus the 9th Canadian Field Ambulance, attached to the Canadian 3rd Division, was not involved.



But even so, maybe the action merits a short passage at this point.

(Right above: *Canadian troops moving into No-Man's-Land at some time during the operations of the summer of 1917 – from Miroir*)

Those expecting *Hill 70* to be a precipitous and ominous elevation are to be surprised. It is hardly prominent in a countryside that is already flat, the highest points being the summits of slag heaps which date from the mining era of yesteryear. Yet it would seem that it was high enough to have been considered - by the Commanding Officer of the Canadian Corps, Lieutenant-General Arthur Currie – to be the key feature in the area, its capture more important than the city of Lens itself.



(Right above: *This gentle slope rising to the left is, in fact, Hill 70. A monument to the 15th Battalion of the Canadian Infantry stands nearby in tribute. – photograph from 1914*)

Objectives of the attack had been limited and had for the most part been achieved by the end of August 15. Due to the apparent dominance of *Hill 70* over the entire area, it had been expected that the Germans would endeavour to retrieve it and so it proved; on the 16th several strong counter-attacks were launched against the Canadian positions, positions that by this time had been transformed into defensive strong-points.

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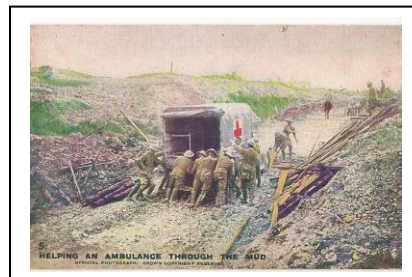
These defences had held and the Canadian artillery, which had been employing newly-developed tactical procedures, had inflicted heavy losses on the enemy. *Hill 70* was to remain in Canadian hands*.

(Right: A Canadian 220 mm siege gun, here under camouflage nets in the Lens Sector, being prepared for action – from *Le Miroir*)



The 9th CFA War Diary makes no mention of this episode; by August 15 the Ambulance was concluding its transfer to a more northerly site – to Auchel where it had at a prior time previously been posted. In fact, on that particular day, in the area of Marles-les-Mines, the unit was holding a sports day.

(Right above: *Transferring sick and wounded from a field ambulance to the rear through the mud by motorized ambulance and man-power* – from a vintage post-card)



Three days later again, the 9th Canadian Field Ambulance moved once more, this time to the vicinity of *Fosse 10* and *Fosse 11** where a complex of medical facilities – described by the C.O. of the unit as ...*one of the very best in France* – was now operating.

**This was coal-mining country and the designation 'Fosse' signifies the pit-head of a mine.*

And it was here - according to Private Baggs' documents - that he and his unit of the prior twenty months were to part ways.

What exactly it was that decided Private Baggs to transfer from a unit dedicated to the saving of lives to one whose purpose was that of killing *en masse* is not recorded: then again, perhaps the choice was not his. Whatever the reason, it appears to be on August 23 of 1917 that he was *struck off strength* by the 9th Canadian Field Ambulance and, on the morrow, *taken on strength* by the 15th Canadian Machine Gun Company.

He is documented as having reported *to duty* with his new unit on August 30, 1917.

* * * * *

The 15th Canadian Machine-Gun Company had been organized some seven months previously, in February of 1917, as the result of a re-organization of the existing Canadian machine-gun forces.

The potential of the weapon, with the fire-power of an infantry section, to play a number of roles – personal infantry, anti-aircraft, light artillery (barrage), mobile (tanks) – was finally becoming evident, and its use and numbers was expanding rapidly – the Canadian Machine Gun Corps was to come into being in that April, just days after the storming of Vimy Ridge.

(continued)

From February 21, when the Company War Diary was initiated, until the end of the month of March the unit had been in the rear area undergoing training and instruction. While many of its personnel already had experience with the machine-gun and its uses, a goodly number of the sixteen newly-formed machine-gun companies had only recently been attached from other units. And it must also be remembered that the Canadians had begun the war using the Colt machine-gun: they were now being equipped with the British-made Vickers* weapon. It was not until the end of the month of March that the 15th Machine-Gun Company, by then attached to the Canadian 3rd Division, had been ordered to move into the forward area.

**The infantry for the most part was now to use the much lighter Lewis machine-gun.*

The role of the machine-gun companies during the fighting of April 9 and the days following at Vimy Ridge was quite similar to that of certain of the artillery units. The Vickers gun had a maximum range of over four kilometres and thus, when used in numbers, was able to use plunging fire to great effect, creating almost impenetrable curtains of bullets. The weapon's reliability was such that it was capable of firing more than ten-thousand rounds per hour – for hours on end, with a two-minute pause necessary to change the barrel every hour.

This was apparently the manner in which the sixteen Vickers guns of the 15th Machine Gun Company were primarily employed at Vimy Ridge, in general barrages and against specific targets if and when they presented themselves. As the troops went forward this barrage of machine-gun fire was turned particularly onto the enemy trenches and defensive positions. This was apparently the first such use of this tactic.



(Right above: *Canadian machine-gun troops becoming familiar with their new Vickers weapons in the spring of 1917 – from Le Miroir*)

As a matter of interest, any casualties incurred by the unit may well have passed at some point through one of the posts or stations being operated at the time by Private Baggs' 9th Canadian Field Ambulance.

The farm by the name of *La Folie* had been one on the first objectives of the attack of April 9. Taken during the first forty minutes of the offensive, it was to there that the 15th CMG Company was moved within days. It was to remain headquartered there until May 21 during which period it would appear that its guns were often called upon to counter intrusions by enemy aircraft. On that May 21, six days after the official end of the *Battle of Arras*, the unit was relieved.

The relief lasted eight days: at twenty minutes past eleven in the evening of May 29, the unit was back in the *La Folie* sector. There it spent the last two days of that month and the first nine of June supporting both infantry and artillery activity – and expending enormous quantities of ammunition in doing so, almost one-hundred ten thousand rounds on June 9 alone.

(continued)

The days and weeks were now to pass in a routine manner. While it was posted in the forward area, the unit supported raids – minor and major – on several occasions*, harassed the German positions and drove off his aircraft. Casualties were few in number, caused for the most part by enemy artillery fire. While withdrawn from the front there were inspections, parades – including one on the occasion of a royal visit, training, instruction, initiation of re-enforcements, sports...and even the occasional bath...

**But not the action at Hill 70 of August 15 as this was a 1st and 2nd Canadian Division affair.*

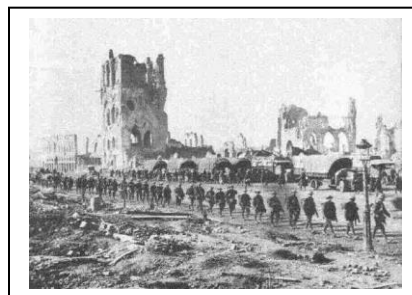
* * * * *

The 15th CMG Company was, at the time of Private Baggs' reported arrival, still in the area of the mining-centre and city of Lens where it had been for the previous while. The War Diary records it as being active in the trenches on that August 30, at first being shelled, and then as forestalling an enemy attack. It is unlikely that he was sent immediately to the forward area, most likely remaining in the unit's transport lines or some other rear area.

Private Baggs' first experience of the trenches with his new unit was most probably on September 4. By that time the 15th CMG Company had moved southward to the area of La Targette – also at the time known as Aux Rietz – and by the evening of that September 4 had relieved a British company. It may have been a new experience for Private Baggs but for the veterans of the unit the venue may have changed but the daily programme remained much the same, both in and out of the lines.

Not everything was to be new for Private Baggs, however: he was now back in an area which he would have known through his time of service with the 9th CFA, St-Éloi and Écoivres.

The Canadian-led campaign during that summer of 1917 had been scheduled to continue into September and even longer, but the ongoing British summer offensive in Belgium was proceeding less well than expected and the High Command was looking for reinforcements to make good the exorbitant losses. The Australians and then the Canadians were ordered to prepare to move north, thus the Canadians were obliged to abandon their plans.



(Right above: Troops file through the rubble of the medieval city of Ypres on their way to the front in the late summer of 1917. – from Illustration)

In the middle of October the Canadians had been ordered north into Belgium and to the *Ypres Salient*. Officially designated the *Third Battle of Ypres*, the campaign – ongoing since the end of that July - came to be known to history as *Passchendaele*, taking that name from a small village on a ridge that was ostensibly one of the British Army's objectives.



(Right: Somewhere, perhaps anywhere, on the battlefield of Passchendaele during the autumn of 1917. – from Illustration)

From the time that the Canadians had entered the fray, it was they who were to shoulder a great deal of the burden. For the week of October 26 until November 3 it was to be the 3rd and 4th Canadian Divisions which were the spearhead of the assault, with the 1st and 2nd Divisions in reserve.



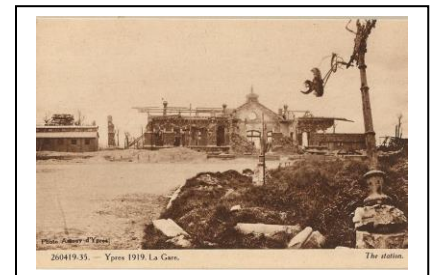
From November 5 until the *official* end of the affair – November 10 - the reverse was to be true with troops of the 2nd Division entering the ruins of Passchendaele itself.

(Right above: *The monument to the sacrifice of the Canadians which stands in the outskirts of the re-constructed village of Passchendaele (today Passendale) – photograph from 2010*)

In the meantime, however, while the move into the Kingdom of Belgium was imminent for the 15th Canadian Machine Gun Company, it was less so for Private Baggs. On September 30 he was sent *On Command* to the Canadian Corps School where he was thereupon despatched to the Machine-Gun Wing. He was not to re-join his unit for four weeks less a day, on October 27.

Without his presence, on October 6, Private Baggs' Company began its trek northward to *Passchendaele*. Having travelled on foot to Bethencourt where it trained for nine days before boarding a train at nearby Tinques, the unit was next to spend a further five days in the proximity of the community of Borre, itself close to the northern French town of Hazebrouck.

Following this period at Borre, the 15th CMG Company was to traverse the Franco-Belgian frontier at some time during the morning of October 22. It had boarded a train at Castre during the night at a quarter-past two, from there to arrive – likely at Ypres station just outside the southern ramparts of the city – some thirteen hours later*, at three-thirty in the afternoon. From the railway-station Private Baggs' comrades-in-arms crossed the city in a north-easterly direction to finish up at 'X' Reserve Camp in the area of Wieltje.



**This information is from the 3rd Canadian Division War Diary: the Company War Diary cites the journey from Castre having taken a very unlikely thirty-seven hours and is not compatible with the time-table that follows.*

(Right above: *The remnants of the railway station just outside the ramparts of Ypres where the 15th CMG Company detrained – the image is from 1919 – from a vintage post-card*)

At thirty minutes past noon of October 23 the Company paraded and began to move up into the forward area; apparently the operation took some eighteen hours as the various sections were not all reported in place until half-past six on the following morning. Perhaps the seventy-four thousand rounds of .303 ammunition that the Company was carrying up to the line slowed it down.

All was now being prepared for another offensive: (Excerpt from 15th CMG Company War Diary entry for October 25, 1917) *...Company carriers established dumps in forward areas, and carried 300,000 rds S.A.A. (small arms ammunition) also salvaged bombs and S.A.A. in vicinity of YETTA HOUSE, also improving machine-gun emplacements, and accommodations.*



(Right above: *Canadian troops performing their ablutions in the water collecting in a shell hole at some time during the last month of Passchendaele – from Le Miroir*)

The next four days were spent bringing up more ammunition that had remained in reserve and in positioning the eight guns that had already been brought forward. It was not until October 29, the eve of the attack, that the eight other guns, which had also been left in reserve at the Company Transport Lines because of the bad weather and the mud, were finally brought forward and dug into positions which had been established for them. During these five days everything that moved appears to have deserved the attention of the enemy artillery.

Those things and persons moving, by the end of that period, may have included Private Baggs who once more was by then serving with his new unit. In his own papers the date of his return is documented as October 27, which may well have been his reporting *to duty* in the rear area: the War Diary does not cite any arrivals at the front until October 30 when *...Reinforcements were sent up to fill the place of casualties during the night.*



There appears to be no certain information on this matter.

(Right above: *Just a few hundred metres to the south-west of Passchendaele – and looking in the opposite direction from the site of the monument pictured just previously – the Canadians would have been attacking up the slope and advancing towards the camera - photograph from 2010*)

(Excerpt from 15th CMG Company entry for October 30, 1917) *Our troops attacked and captured PASSCHENDAELE RIDGE. Zero hour was 5.40 a.m. Attack was successful, firing all through the engagement firing in all 600,000 rds S.A.A. Our positions were heavily shelled throughout the day and night and casualties were very heavy...*

The son of Henry George Baggs, fisherman, and of Catherine (also spelled *Katherine*) Baggs (née *Janes*) of Salem (likely *Broad Cove*), Baie de Verde, Newfoundland, he also was brother to Charles-Rowland and to Henry-Thomas, Matthew and to Lucy-Embree – these final three all deceased before at or before the age of two years.



(Preceding page: *This family monument to the memory of Private (Rev) John W. Baggs stands next to one of his mother, Catherine, in Broad Cove United Church Cemetery. – photograph from 2010(?)*)

Private Baggs was reported as having been wounded on October 30, injured by shrapnel in his right-hand side. Evacuated from the field, he was eventually admitted into the 41st Casualty Clearing Station at Nine Elms – north-west of Poperinghe – where he was later declared as having *died of wounds* on October 31, 1917*.

John William Baggs had enlisted at the age of twenty-six years and ten months: date of birth in Broad Cove (elsewhere cited as *Salem*), Newfoundland, November 17, 1890.

Private John William Baggs was entitled to the British War Medal (left) and to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal).



The following information has been made available by kind permission of Mr. Frank Davis whom I would like to thank for his interest as well as this contribution:

Jack D would always tell me about his Dad in WW1 and how he (his Dad) would tell Jack about the day he and Baggs were walking along by a trench and they stopped to talk to someone. JSD (his Dad) turned around and stepped away and in that instant Baggs was shot by a sniper. He died of wounds same day in a dressing station.*

John Shenstone Davis (by the end of his service, Sergeant, Number 530529) attested at the same time – just twenty men later - as did John William Baggs, on January 13, 1916. He also was to serve in the 9th Canadian Field Ambulance and later the 15th Canadian Machine-Gun Company, although his transfer to that unit came about some weeks after that of Private Baggs.

Apparently at the time of that change he was a junior NCO but reverted to the ranks – of his own accord – in early October of 1917. Thus his military career in the 15th Machine-Gun Company would have been much as related above...

...Except that it appears that on the very date that Private Baggs returned from the Canadian Corps School, October 27, Private Davis was despatched to it – there is little doubt that this is so as he is recorded as having reported back to the unit a month later.

Thus he could not have been present at the time of his friend's death – and of course the circumstances surrounding the death which he presents are unlikely to have happened exactly as described, since a battle was raging. BUT...he surely heard of Private Baggs's death and of the *true* details when he returned to service in November.

(continued)

One of the more desperately painful duties of an officer was to write to the family of those of his men who had fallen in service. At first in reading some of those letters one is surprised by the number of men who died instantly...until one realizes, of course, that a great number of them didn't: they were shattered, broken, bloody, frothing at the mouth, screaming wretches whose last days, hours and minutes were nothing that we would care to imagine. Our officer realizes that the loss of a son, brother, friend, sweetheart is distressful enough to bear as it is...thus the soldier meets a quick death.

May we presume the same of Sergeant Davis who, when obliged to speak of his friend, John William Baggs, took it upon himself to do the same thing? It would be nice to believe that he did.

The above dossier has been researched, compiled and produced by Alistair Rice. Please email any suggested amendments or content revisions if desired to *criceadam@yahoo.ca*. Last updated – January 25, 2023.