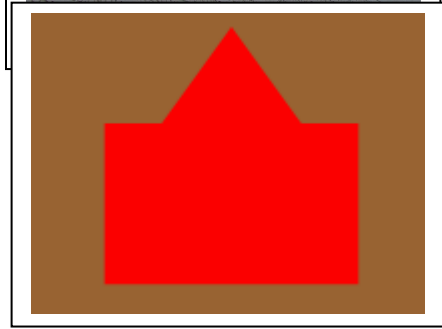
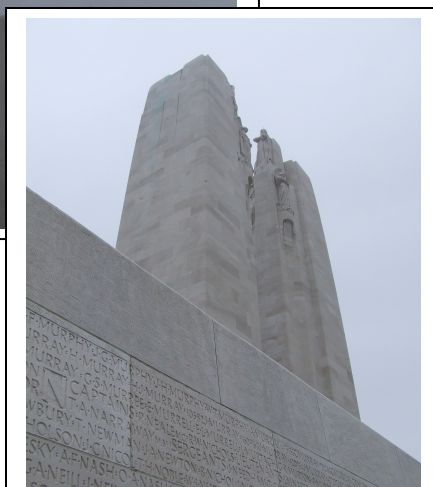




Private Edward Baker



(Number A38084 in certain official files and the *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.*

Private Baker was to train for the succeeding three months in the vicinity of one of the twin cities of Port Arthur and Fort William*, the activities of these two separate groups of

recruits being co-ordinated by the Commanding Officer of the Battalion who was based in the Armouries at Port Arthur. At the beginning there were no barrack facilities available and so the fledgling soldiers were billeted with the local populations.

**The two cities were amalgamated in 1970 to become the community of Thunder Bay.*

The summer was to be spent in camp – but first of all it had to be built. It was apparently done quite economically as it was the Battalion personnel who provided the labour. The camp itself was established in an area known as *Gresley Park* at a distance of some five kilometres from the city of Port Arthur. It was taken over by the parent unit on June 15, the day after the First Draft of the 52nd Battalion had left for overseas service**.

**Thus Private Baker, a soldier of that First Draft, was never to enjoy the fruit of his hard labour.*

The 1st Reinforcing Draft of the 52nd Battalion (*New Ontario*) was despatched 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 in the 2nd Canadian Division which was then 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, 1915, 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 *Scandinavian*. At least five other units were to take passage on board *Scandinavian*: 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.*

(continued)

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, Shorncliffe, then being established in the vicinity of the English-Channel town and harbour 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 there at Shorncliffe 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, on the coast opposite a brief two hours' sailing-time away. It was also on this same August 3 that he was attached – on paper - to the 8th Battalion (*90th Winnipeg Rifles*) and 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*)

The exact date on which Private Baker reported *to duty* with the unit *in the field*, however, appears to be undocumented.



(Right above: *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*)

* * * * *

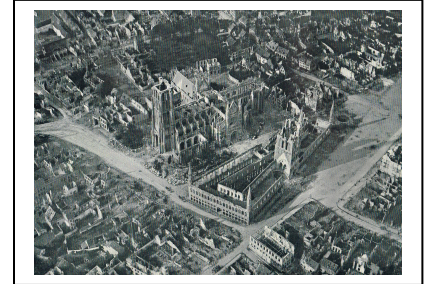
The 8th Battalion (*Winnipeg Rifles*) had by that time been serving on the Continent since February 13 of 1915 – when it has disembarked from the transport *Archimedes* in St-Nazaire harbour - as an element of the 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade, itself a component of the (1st) Canadian Division*. The entire Division had at first served in northern France in the Fleurbaix Sector just south of Armentières, before moving to the *Ypres Salient* in April of that same 1915.

(continued)

**Before the advent of the 2nd Canadian Division, the 1st Canadian Division was designated simply as the Canadian Division.*

The 8th Battalion had crossed the Franco-Belgian frontier in busses on April 14. This transport carried the unit as far as the village of Vlamertinghe, to the west of Ypres, from where it then proceeded on foot to the north-east area of the *Ypres Salient*. There it took over trenches from the 69th French Regiment at Gravenstal, a name soon to become a part of the Battalion's – and Canada's - history.

(Right: An aerial photograph, taken in July of 1915 – just after the battle - showing 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)



The first major action between the Canadian Division and the German Army was to occur only days later, a confrontation that the historians were to designate as the **2nd Battle of Ypres**.

It came about at five o'clock in the afternoon of April 22 of 1915.

The **2nd Battle of Ypres** saw the first use of chlorine gas by the Germans in the *Great War*. Later to become an everyday event, with the advent of protective measures such as advanced gas-masks, it was to prove no more dangerous than the rest of the military arsenals of the warring nations. But on this first occasion, to troops without means to combat it, the yellow-green cloud of chlorine proved overwhelming.



(Right above: The very first protection against gas was to urinate on a handkerchief which was then held over the nose and mouth. However, all the armies were soon producing gas-masks, some of the first of which are seen here being tested by Scottish troops. – from either Illustration or Le Miroir)



(Right: Entitled: Bombardement d'Ypres, le 5 juillet 1915 – from Illustration)

The cloud was noticed in the afternoon of April 22. In the sector subjected to the most concentrated use of the gas, the French Colonial troops to the Canadian left wavered then broke, leaving the left flank of the Canadians uncovered. The 8th Battalion, in the area of Gravenstafel, posted in trenches just to the right of the French position found themselves suddenly exposed to the German advance. They held firm – just.

On the 23rd the situation had become relatively stable, the positions in the vicinity of Sint-Juliaan held until the morning of the 24th when a further retirement by both British and Canadian units in some areas had become necessary.

(continued)

However, according to the War Diary of the 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade, on April 25, some sixty hours after the onset of the German attack, the 8th Battalion were still holding its original positions. Later on that afternoon the unit was relieved by British troops.

At times there had been gaps in the defensive lines but, fortunately, either the Germans were unaware of how close



they were to a breakthrough, or they did not have the means to exploit the situation.

And then the Canadians closed the gaps.

(Right: The Memorial to the 1st Canadian Division – the Brooding Soldier – stands just to the south of the village of Langemark (at the time Langemarck) – at the Vancouver Crossroads - where the Canadians withstood the German attack – abetted by gas – at Ypres (today Ieper) in April of 1915. – photograph from 2010)

As had many other units, the 8th Battalion, had incurred numerous casualties; in the appendices of the 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade War Diary are to be found the following numbers: *killed in action, fifty-five; wounded, two-hundred eight; wounded and missing, forty-two; missing in action, one-hundred fifty-five; sick from fumes, one-hundred thirteen; shock, three; died from wounds, one.*

(Right: Troops – in this instance British – in hastily-dug trenches in the Ypres Salient. These are still the early days of the year as witnessed by the lack of steel helmets which only came into use in the spring and summer of 1916. – from Illustration)

During the first six days of May the Battalion was... *Still in reserve on Canal Bank*... Intermittently shelled.* (Excerpt of May 1 entry of 8th Battalion War Diary)



Finally, on May 6, the Battalion retired the considerable distance from there through Vlamertinghe to the area of northern French town of Bailleul where it arrived on the following day, May 7. There it was to re-enforce and re-organize, but not until *after* that first day during which... *no work done, men allowed to sleep until afternoon...*

**This was the Yser Canal which flows through Ypres and which, to the north of the city, at times became a part of the front line.*

(Right: The Yser Canal at a point in the northern outskirts of Ypres almost a century after the 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade moved forward to its western bank from Vlamertinghe – west is to the left – photograph from 2014)



(continued)

There followed two weeks of rest – as restful as it ever got during the *Great War* – before the 8th Battalion was ordered south, on May 19 and in pouring rain, further into France to fight in actions to be undertaken near places by the names of Festubert and Givenchy. The French were about to undertake a major offensive just further south again and had asked for British support to prevent the Germans re-enforcing the French front.

There at Festubert a series of attacks and counter-attacks took place in which the British High Command managed to gain three kilometres of ground but also contrived to destroy, by using the unimaginative tactic of the frontal assault, what was left of the British pre-War

professional Army. The Canadian Division was also to serve during the campaign but – not contributing the same numbers of troops as the British – was logically not to participate to the same extent. It nonetheless suffered.

The 8th Battalion had first entered the line, in reserve dugouts, in the area of Festubert on that May 20. This tour was to be of three days duration, the Battalion being relieved on June 22. By that time the unit had been involved in attacks against German strongpoints and had also been heavily shelled: casualties for that short period, thirty-one dead and one-hundred forty wounded.

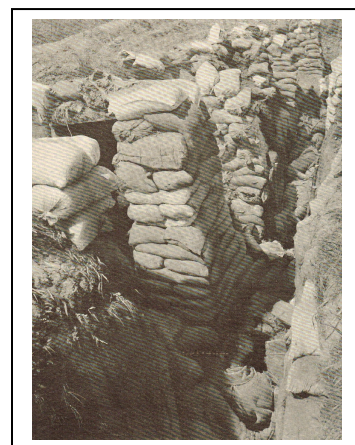
A second tour saw less ambitious attacks delivered by the Battalion which also supplied large working parties for digging trenches; casualties were once more incurred, although fewer in number. The unit was withdrawn from the forward area to Essars on May 27 – to be ordered into trenches at Givenchy five days later.

Indian troops of the Meerut Division also served – and lost heavily – in other battles in this area in 1915 before being transferred to the Middle East.



(Right above: *A one-time officer who served in the Indian Army during the Second World War, pays his respects to those who fell, at the Indian Memorial at Neuve-Chapelle. – photograph from 2010(?)*)

(Right: *German trenches nick-named the Labyrinth captured by the French at their Pyrrhic victory at Notre-Dame de Lorette – Over one-hundred thousand French troops became casualties during this campaign in the Artois. – from Illustration*)



The Canadian Division and Indian troops, the 7th (*Meerut*) Division* also having been ordered to serve at Festubert, had hardly fared better than the British, each contingent – a Division - incurring over two-thousand casualties before the offensive drew to a close.

The French effort – using the same tactics - was likewise to be a failure but on an even larger scale; it cost them just over one hundred-thousand *killed, wounded and missing*.

(continued)

Givenchy-les-la-Bassée* is a small village not far distant south of Festubert. Having been ordered into the forward trenches on June 1, the Battalion experienced a very quiet seven-day posting there. A further three-day posting into the front line occurred from June 17 to 19 inclusive; little infantry activity was reported – although the German artillery paid the 8th Battalion a lot of attention.

A day later the unit returned to the forward area – and once again the enemy guns were responsible for most if not all of the casualties – until the night of June 22-23 when it

retired from the field and from that particular theatre of the war. At about the same time, over a number of days, *all* the units of the Canadian Division were to retire from Givenchy.

**Since the place is oft-times referred to simply as Givenchy it is worthwhile knowing that there are two other Givenchys in the region: Givenchy-le-Noble, to the west of Arras, and Givenchy-en-Gohelle, a village which lies in the shadow of a crest of land which dominates the Douai Plain: Vimy Ridge.*

As a part of that withdrawal from Givenchy, the 8th Battalion was to march to billets in Béthune. From there it was to move northwards and into Belgium, to the *Ploegsteert Sector*, just across the frontier.

Having reached the *Ploegsteert Sector* on June 26, there the 8th Battalion remained – as did the entire Canadian Division. In the next months it came to be well-acquainted with the Franco-Belgian area between Armentières in the east – any further east would have been in German-occupied territory – Bailleul in the west, and Messines in the north. It was in the vicinity of this last-named community that the unit was now posted.



(Right above: *Some of the farmland in the area of Messines, a mine crater from the time of the 1917 British offensive in the foreground – photograph from 2014*)

The 8th Battalion was still in the area of Messines on August 7, a day on which the unit was in billets behind the lines. Two events are entered into the Battalion War Diary for that particular day: the first was a visit in the morning to the Battalion by... *Maj Gen Hughes Min of Militia for Canada**; the second was that a... *Draft of 151 men arrived from England*. As has been noted, no date appears to be recorded amongst Private Baker's papers of the date of his reporting to duty, but this was likely the occasion.

**Sir Samuel Hughes KCB, PC, Minister of Militia in Canada from 1911 until his dismissal in November of 1916, he was praised by some and berated by others for his actions and behaviour during the period of his tenure.*

During the period of 1915-1916 now to be spent in Belgium, there were to be only two occasions on which units of the Canadian Divisions were required to fight concerted infantry actions – the first being the action at the *Mont St-Éloi Craters* and the second, the confrontation at *Mount Sorrel** – otherwise there were to pass some fourteen months of the routines and rigours of trench warfare**.

**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*



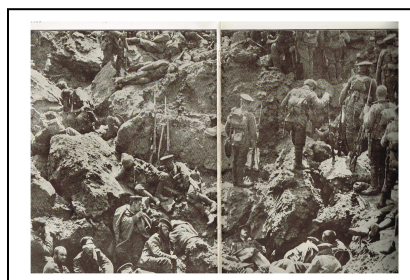
withdrawn into reserve – either Brigade, Divisional or Corps Reserve, the former nearest to the forward area, the latter the furthest away.

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.

(Right above: 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, Private Baker was sent to a – perhaps the *only* – 2nd Brigade Grenade Company. The grenade - often referred to as a bomb at that time – after more than a century of neglect, 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.*

(continued)

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 apparently all familiar to the 8th Battalion as well as to other Canadian units.

**At the beginning of April the 1st Canadian Division had been ordered from the Ploegsteert Sector to the south of Ypres, to be stationed between the Canadian 2nd and 3rd Divisions.*

(Right below: *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 below: *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 to be a costly disaster for the Canadians.



(Right: *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*)



(continued)

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.

The 8th Battalion appears to have played little part in the earlier events of the eleven-day action, being held in reserve to the south-west of the fighting. However it took a major role in the final days of the fighting. Having moved up to the area of



Railway Dugouts on June 12, it moved into its assembly area late that evening; the 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade had ordered the unit to re-take Mount Sorrel itself.

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

This it did. After a heavy preliminary bombardment, the final counter-attack went in at half-past one in the early morning of June 13. The objectives had soon be taken although the response by the German artillery during the remainder of that day and the following was furious. The 8th Battalion had begun its attack with a strength of five-hundred seventy all ranks: the casualty count by the time of its retirement on the evening of June 14 was sixty-five *killed*, two hundred *wounded* and two *missing* – approaching the fifty per cent mark.

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 in the community of Candas at eight o'clock on the following morning.

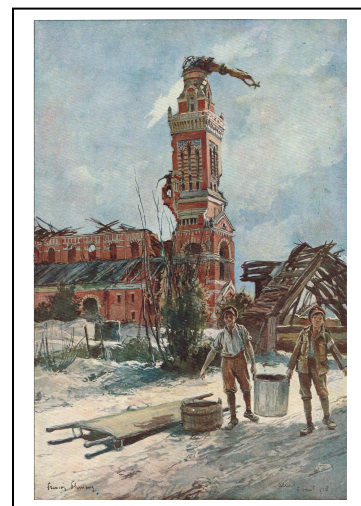


(Right: *Maple Copse, the scene of heavy fighting in June of 1916, and its cemetery wherein lie numerous Canadians – photograph from 2014*)

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 – in the short span of only four hours - of which some nineteen thousand dead.

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



On that first day all but two small units of the attacking divisions had been from the British Isles, the exceptions being the two hundred men of the Bermuda Rifles serving in the Lincolnshire Regiment, and the eight-hundred personnel of the Newfoundland Regiment which lost so heavily on that day.

As the Battle had progressed, troops from the Empire (*Commonwealth*) were brought in; at first it had been the South African Brigade (July 15), 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 two

villages, Flers and Courcelette – although the involvement of the 8th Battalion was to come towards the end of the offensive and was very peripheral (see below).

(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, *Brickfields*, 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 8th Battalion personnel was briefed on the happenings on the front in the Courcelette Sector: for the most part the Canadians had taken a beating.

(Right: *Wounded troops being evacuated in hand-carts from the forward area during the 1st Battle of the Somme – from Le Miroir or Illustration*)



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.

An attack by the Canadian forces in the area being imminent, the troops were reported in their jumping-off positions by 1.30 a.m. There they waited for eleven hours 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.

(continued)

(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 in fact 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.

(Right: *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 fighting in the area of Flers-Courcellette.

Edward Baker had enlisted at the apparent age of twenty-two years and seven months: date of birth at Belleoram, Newfoundland, 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).



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 28, 2023.