



Private John George Baggs (Number 715935) of the Royal Canadian Regiment, Canadian Expeditionary Force, is buried in La Chaudière Military Cemetery, Vimy: Grave reference VII.D.3.

His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of an iron-worker (also steel-worker), John George Baggs was *perhaps* the George Baggs to be found on the passenger list of March 28, 1913, of the SS *Bruce* which made the passage from Port aux Basques to North Sydney, Cape Breton, on that date.

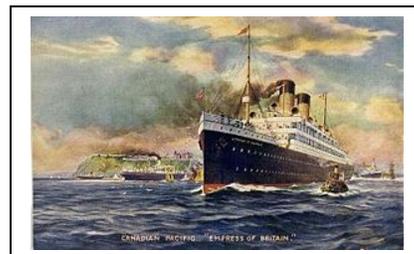
(Right: *The image of the cap badge of the Royal Canadian Regiment is from Wikipedia.*)



John George Baggs enlisted on February 2 of 1916 in Pictou, Nova Scotia. After having then attested on the 26th of the same month, he presented himself for medical examination three days later. Finally, on March 11, he was accepted and was thereupon attached to the 106th (Overseas) Battalion (*Nova Scotia Rifles*) to commence some four months of training before departing Canada*.

**He was likely also attached to “B” Company whose recruiting was done in the area of Pictou and Antigonish.*

The 106th Battalion embarked* onto His Majesty’s Transport *Empress of Britain* - a requisitioned vessel of the *Canadian Pacific Line* – on July 15 of 1916. The vessel sailed on the same day, leaving Halifax en route for the English west-coast port-city of Liverpool where she docked some ten days later, on July 25.



**The 106th Battalion was not to take passage alone to the United Kingdom; several other units had boarded at the same time: the 93rd and 105th Battalions, Canadian Infantry; the 5th Draft of the Royal Canadian Dragoons; some of the 1st Draft of the 63rd Regiment (Halifax Rifles); and the 8th Draft of ‘C’ Battery of the Royal Canadian Horse Artillery.*

(Right above: *The image of the RMS (Royal Mail Ship) Empress of Britain is from the Wikipedia web-site.*)

Having arrived in the United Kingdom, the 106th Overseas Battalion was transported by train to the large Canadian military establishment at *Shorncliffe* in the vicinity of the English Channel coastal town and harbour of Folkestone in the county of Kent. However, having been in camp for only a matter of days, Private Baggs was admitted into the Military Hospital there on July 31 for medical attention to a venereal problem.



He was discharged *to duty* from hospital a month afterwards, on August 28.

(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*)

One week later again, he was transferred, on October 5, to the 40th Reserve Battalion (*Nova Scotia*) on whose nominal roll he remained until January 4 of 1917 when the entire Battalion was absorbed by the newly-formed 26th (Reserve) Battalion*. Both of these units were stationed at Shorncliffe, at Dibgate Camp*

**A second source has January 22 as the date of transfer, but this would have suggested a void of eighteen days in his service record.*

***Apparently ‘Shorncliffe’ was an all-encompassing name for the complex which comprised a number of individual camps.*

A full year had passed after the day of his enlistment by the time Private Baggs crossed the English Channel en route to *active service* – likely taking passage from nearby Folkestone to the French port of Boulogne on the coast opposite, just some two hours' sailing time away. The move apparently began on February 17, 1917; five days later he is recorded as having landed in France and as having his name added to the nominal roll of the Royal Canadian Regiment, the senior infantry unit in the Canadian Army.



(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*)

(Right below: *The French port of Boulogne at or about the time of the Great War – from a vintage post-card*)

**While most of the former regiments in the Canadian Forces – both regular and militia - were organized into numbered battalions during the period of the Great War, the Royal Canadian Regiment and the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry were permitted to retain their regimental title.*



Upon their arrival on the Continent, the new arrivals were transported to spend time undergoing final organization at the Canadian Base Depot in the vicinity of the port-city of Le Havre. It was from here that he awaited the opportune moment for despatch to his new unit. Private Baggs' documents record him as having reported *to duty* with the RCR in the field on either March 3 or 5.

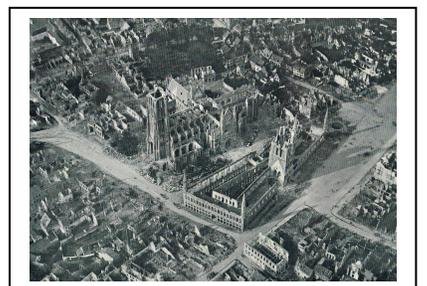


(Right: *The French port-city of Le Havre at or about the time of the Great War – from a vintage post-card*)

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The Royal Canadian Regiment, although being the senior Regiment in the Canadian Army at the outbreak of *the Great War*, had not been among the first units to be despatched overseas; in fact, it had been sent to languish for a year in the British possession of Bermuda. After it had been returned home in the summer of 1915 the unit was thereupon ordered to the United Kingdom.

There it had been attached to the 7th Infantry Brigade of the 3rd Canadian Division and transferred to the Continent on November 1 of 1915. It had then immediately been sent to the Franco-Belgian frontier area before, in March, being posted to serve in the south-east sector of the *Ypres Salient*.



The unit's first major action was to be the confrontation with the Germans at *Mount Sorrel*, in that same south-east area of the *Ypres Salient*.

(Previous page: An aerial photograph, taken in July of 1915 – just after the battle of 2nd Ypres - which shows the shell of the medieval city, an image entitled Ypres-la-Morte (Ypres the Dead) – By the end of the conflict there was little left standing. – from Illustration)

On June 2 the Germans had 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 Hooze, of Sanctuary Wood, Hill 60, Maple Copse, Railway Dugouts and also the promontory which 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 – photograph from 2010)

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 patch up their defences. The hurriedly-contrived counter-strike of the following day, delivered piece-meal and poorly co-ordinated, was a costly disaster for the Canadians.



(Right: 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)

Ten days later the Canadians again counter-attacked, on this occasion 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)

The Royal Canadian Regiment Battalion had been caught in the maelstrom of June 2 and had remained in the forward area until the night of June 5-6 when it had been relieved and had retired to Camp “B” well to the rear. The unit was not to serve again during the action at Mount Sorrel where it had by then incurred some one-hundred forty-five casualties.

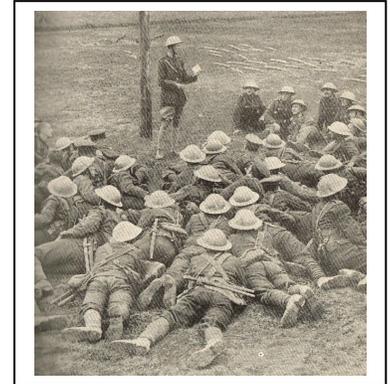


Thus it was back to the everyday routines of trench warfare for some two months at which time the Battalion – as was to be the case of most of the other Canadian Battalions – was once more withdrawn, on this occasion for training in ‘open warfare’. The Canadians were about to travel south into France to play a role in the British summer offensive of 1916.

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By 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 a short span of only four hours - of which some nineteen-thousand dead.

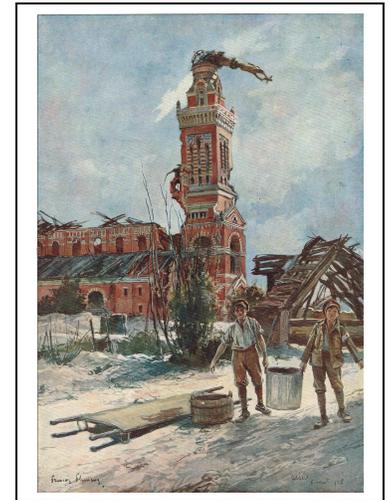
(Right: *An image purporting to be that of a Canadian officer giving instructions to those under his command prior to the attack at Flers-Courcelette, September 1916. – from The War Illustrated*)



On that first day of *1st Somme*, 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 *1st Battalion, Newfoundland Regiment* which was to lose so heavily on that July 1 at *Beaumont-Hamel*.

As the battle had progressed, other troops, from the Empire (*Commonwealth*), had been 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 be part of a third general offensive. Their first major collective contribution was to be in the area of the two villages of *Flers* and *Courcelette*.

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



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

The RCR arrived in the area of the provincial town of *Albert* in the late evening of September 13 and just two days later, on September 15, was ordered to move forward in order to attack a German strong-point, the *Zollern Graben*, on the following day. By four o'clock in the morning of September 17, when it withdrew, the RCR had incurred some two-hundred eighty casualties and the *Zollern Graben* was still in German hands.



Another major action was to follow: the attack of October 8-9 on the *Regina Trench* system was not a success but, on the contrary, an expensive failure; the German positions would not be definitively taken until November 11. By that time the RCR was to be in the *Lens Sector*, some fifty kilometres to the north. In fact, the unit was to be moving in that direction within days of having fought at *Regina Trench*.



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(Preceding page: *Regina Trench Cemetery and some of the surrounding area, ground which was finally wrested from the Germans by Canadian troops in November of 1916 – photograph from 2014*)

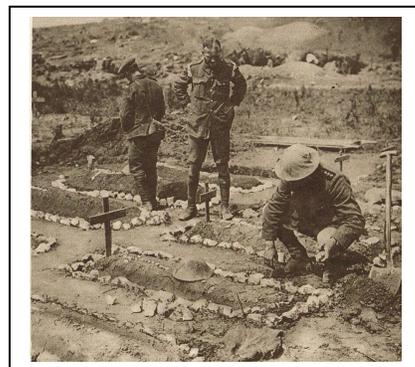
(Right below: *Wounded at the Somme being transported in hand-carts from the forward area for further medical attention – from Le Miroir*)

During the five weeks of its sojourn at *the Somme* the Battalion had lost, *killed and wounded*, about four-hundred fifty *all ranks*. Over two hundred more had been reported as *missing in action*, the War Diarist optimistically predicting that most of them would be later found in field ambulances and casualty clearing stations. The accuracy of that prediction does not appear to be documented.



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

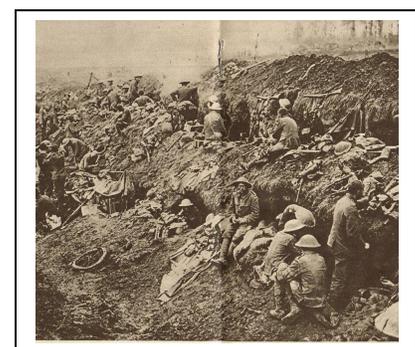
The RCR Battalion began to withdraw from *the Somme* on October 10. The Battalion War Diarist makes no mention of any motor transport or train being employed so it may be assumed that the unit, as did many others, retired on foot. The route took it westward at first, then to turn northward so as to pass west of the by-now battered city of Arras and beyond.



It was on the 24th of that October of 1916 that the Battalion arrived in the Neuville St-Vaast Sector to the north-west of Arras. The War Diarist on that date has reported Battalion strength as being three-hundred eighty-six all ranks, less than forty per cent of regulation battalion numbers. *The Somme* had taken its toll.

Having arrived in its new sector, the unit once again began the daily routines and rigours of life in the trenches* - likely a welcome respite.

**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, a hundred metres or so behind the front; the unit was then withdrawn into reserve – either Brigade, Divisional or Corps Reserve, the former nearest the forward area, the latter 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.

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(Preceding 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)

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

Thus the winter of 1916-1917 was to pass in that manner for the Royal Canadian Regiment. The Battalion War Diary is fairly repetitive in its entries: little in the way of infantry action except patrols and the occasional raid – by both sides – all local activity; and most casualties due to German artillery and snipers.



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The RCR, at the time of Private Baggs' arrival in early March of 1917, was stationed at Bruay, a community behind the lines and perhaps some thirty kilometres to the north-west of Arras.

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



It was to remain in that area until the 21st when it was ordered southwards to La Motte and then to Villers au Bois, in an area behind the lines and near to where the ground sloped upwards, to the top of a rise which dominated the entire Douai Plain. The summit of the rise was known as *la crête de Vimy – Vimy Ridge*.

Then, on the final day of the month the unit withdrew to the rear area of Villers-au-Bois for special training and preparations for an imminent British and Commonwealth offensive.

On April 9 the British Army launched an offensive in the area to the north of the Somme battlefields; this was the so-called *Battle of Arras* intended to support a French effort elsewhere. In terms of the daily count of casualties, some four thousand per day, it was to be the most expensive operation of the War for the British, one of the positive episodes being the Canadian assault of Vimy Ridge on the opening day of the battle, Easter Monday.



(Right above: Since 1936, the Canadian National Memorial has stood on Vimy Ridge – photograph from 2010)

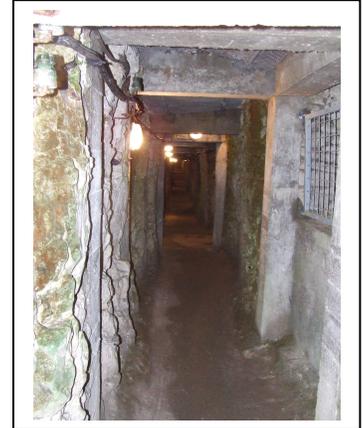
While the British campaign was to be an overall disappointment, the French offensive was a disaster.



(Preceding page: Canadian troops of the 4th or 3rd Division equipped 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)

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

Several kilometres of tunnel hewn out of the chalk under the approaches to the front lines - and beyond - of Vimy Ridge, underground were to afford physical safety and also the element of surprise during the hours - and in some cases, days - leading up to the attack. On April 7, 'A', 'B' and 'C' Companies took their places in *Grange Tunnel*. Towards midnight on April 8, well over twenty-four hours later, these Companies left their subterranean shelter to move forward and take their places in the assembly trenches.



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

It was the 3rd Division - of which the Royal Canadian Regiment was an element - and also the 4th Division whose objective was Vimy Ridge itself, the 1st and 2nd Canadian Divisions having objectives on either side of the main slope*.

****This was the first occasion on which the Canadian Divisions were to act in concert as a Canadian Army Corps rather than been individually attached to a British force. In fact, British forces were now placed under its command.***

The following are excerpts from the RCR War Diary, Appendix Number 2: 5.30 a.m. Wind N.W. Raining. Barrage opens. Enemy barrage comes down... It was very weak. It would appear that the enemy did not know the location of or else could not hit our jumping off trenches... that he had been misled to the day of attack, for he did not appear to expect it.

6.15 a.m. Message...stated "No opposition"...

6.30 a.m. ...reported that everything was going splendidly. We were...in trenches with very few casualties. We were in touch with units on our right and left. There are many prisoners coming back. Our Artillery and Machine Gun Fire very heavy, and the enemy Artillery is erratic and not strong.

(Right: German prisoners being escorted to the rear by Canadian troops as the fight for Vimy Ridge continues - official Canadian photograph via Illustration)

7.35 a.m. P.P.C.L.I. are consolidating Intermediate Objective and are pushing forward to Final Objective. Few Casualties and few prisoners.



7.45 a.m. ...reached our final objective and...well in front of it. The Hun trenches and the ground is in terrible condition; the trenches practically cease to exist. We have had most of our casualties in LA FOLIE WOOD where we apparently ran into a strong point which was in good condition.

8.00 a.m. Message...stated intermediate objective captured and being consolidated.

9.00 a.m. Message from "B" Co. states that final objective was reached and Co. was consolidating... Asked for reinforcements.

9.20 a.m. Reported that Hun counter-attack was repulsed and that they were massing for another counter-attack on our right. The Artillery was ordered to quicken the barrage... the enemy did a certain amount of erratic Artillery shooting for the rest of the day. There were no indications of a counter-attack. Most of our casualties suffered...through snipers.

11.55 a.m. Mopping up reported complete...

Of the ten thousand Canadian casualties of the day, the Royal Canadian Regiment had incurred fifty-six killed in action, one-hundred sixty-five wounded, and a further sixty-five missing in action.

(Right: Casualties of both sides being evacuated from Vimy Ridge by a light railway which is still being constructed - official Canadian photograph via Illustration)



The son of Richard Knight Baggs, fisherman, and Maria (elsewhere *Mira*) Baggs (née *Gill*), of Adam's Cove, he was also brother to at least Charles-Seymour (born 1889), to Ella-Jane (born 1905) and to Stewart-Freeman (born October 4, 1893, see below).

***In the same records (*Puddester Family Tree*) there are documented the births of Richard (born 1886), Orlando James (born 1896) and Enoch (born 1899), children of Richard Baggs (no middle name or initial) and Maria Baggs, also of Adam's Cove. It seems perhaps more than possible that these are also the family of the paragraph above, although this is not confirmed.**

Private Baggs was reported as having been wounded on that April 9, and then having died of wounds on the same day – likely in the field before having been evacuated for medical attention as none is recorded.

John George Baggs had enlisted at the apparent age of twenty-three years and seven months: his date of birth was declared as having been July 15, 1893, except in the Blackhead Methodist Parish Records which cite 1891 as the year of his birth – this probably so, given the birth date of brother Stewart-Freeman in 1893.



(Right above: The photograph of Private Baggs is from a web-site entitled – A Short History and Photographic record of 106th Overseas Battalion C.E.F.)

(continued)

Private John George Baggs was entitled to the British War Medal (left) 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 26, 2023.

