



2007.04.02

Horace L. Baker, *Argonne Days in World War I*. Ed. Robert H. Ferrell. Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 2007. Pp. xii, 157. ISBN 978-0-8262-1708-0.

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The author of this book seeks simply to tell the story of his time in combat. It is a very personal account recording his own bravery and cowardice with an equal hand. It is a straightforward narrative, but it is evident the writer took the time after the war to provide some context for the events, something not often seen in this type of memoir. There is no larger motive for writing the account, no particular point to be made or position to be established or defended—it could almost as well have been told to a group of friends over a couple of beers. For anyone interested in World War I, this is an infantryman’s story told with little embellishment, and revealing things in only the most indirect way.

You have to hand it to Robert Ferrell for his ability to ferret out buried treasure. His edit of *A Youth in the Argonne*¹ was a wonderful find and now this manuscript by Horace L. Baker (1893–1948), another literate World War I soldier. Yes, of course it helps to find the work of an articulate man, but it is also a craft to translate that work into something that makes sense and engages the reader some ninety years after the event. Ferrell has done just that. The Introduction is succinct and to the point—one of the best short (six-page) summaries of American participation the war I have seen. Since I have been sharply critical of map support in other WWI works, it is appropriate to note that the maps accompanying this work are clean, useful representations of the operational area addressed in the narrative. I do carp a bit, however, and note the absence of several towns prominent in the text—notably Cierges.

I began reading this slim work while preparing dinner and almost burned our rations I was so engaged by it. Baker is a deeply religious man, always reading his New Testament. He is clearly also sensible and unusually observant. This latter quality is evident in the first paragraph of Chapter 15, “Brandeville,” as Baker provides the reader the kind of description a professional engineer officer should make of the general nature of the terrain, but adds color and texture: “Brandeville is in a narrow defile eroded from the face of the escarpment. Beyond it is a bold ridge flinging itself in haughty derision at the valley; the end of the ridge is almost a mountain peak lording it over the valleys and plain”(116).

Yet, while observant and sensitive to all about him, he treats it all in a humble, almost detached fashion. Having just seen three of his friends slain, and his company suffering about 40 percent losses, by his estimate, he proceeds to sleep and drink. He observes rather matter-of-factly: “The truth now dawned upon me.... I had slept alone between the lines—in no-man’s-land”(114). He repeatedly calls attention in this way to those perpetual needs of the infantry, sleep and water, but also routinely tells of his ventures in search of

¹ William S. Triplet, *A Youth in the Meuse-Argonne: A Memoir, 1917-1918*, ed. Robert H. Ferrell (Columbia: U Missouri Pr, 2000).

food. Since he appears to be a rather large fellow, he now and again describes himself as faint from want of sustenance and just plain worn to the edge of movement.

The narrative begins with Baker's arrival by train in the operational area. As he recounts the events that follow, the reader gleans insights into who Baker is and how he has arrived in France. In recording his impressions, he evidently had time to edit the text as it contains a litany, a melancholy listing, in the order he encounters them, of those who would not return. He lets the reader know that he is a member of Company M, 128th Infantry Regiment, 32nd Division—proudly a “Shock” division, by his account.

The reader must guess at how well or ill-prepared for combat this unit was. Baker mentions march after march and a great deal of drill, but precious little about actual training, whether stateside or after deploying. In this regard the book is almost typically an ordinary soldier's work: Baker writes about marching, about people close to him, about food, and sleep—all essentials to the soldier and all there is to mention when nothing much else is known at the time. By about page 27, however, he has gone back to reliable accounts of the war and established some context for his remarks which further reinforces the impression that he is a literate man intent on telling the story as close to the truth as possible.

Bits of truth emerge from time to time as Baker tells of patrols going out in broad daylight across open fields only to be shot to pieces; of units standing in the middle of a road, at night, in the pouring rain, hour after hour, for no apparent reason; of corporals and lieutenants acting hesitantly as they—like Baker himself on several occasions—find themselves suddenly in command positions for the first time. The unit seems to exist on the thin edge of chaos owing to the inadequate training and leadership preparation which typified the American Army in France in World War I. Quality inevitably falls off when a ca. 125,000-man force expands to 4 million in a little over a year.

His unit taken from the line and moved to the rear, Baker innocently observes, after wandering off again to find water, “I marvel yet at the freedom I had.... And I wonder ... that I never returned to find the company gone and me not knowing which way it went.... Usually I did not have permission to go and never once got into trouble for going...”(118). He seems to have been trusted by everyone, but his experience also reflects a high turn-over rate of superiors and an absence of serious training among them. While not a straggler in a legal sense, he was sometimes away without leave, although never with any intent permanently to absent himself and always managing to rejoin his unit, an indication of the innocence of the average soldier in the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF). He relates experiences of others whom he correctly judges to be stragglers: “such fellows aren't dangerous and they would not have amounted to much in battle anyway”(119).

Then, as Baker accounts for his activities on 10 November 1918, we read of the rout of at least a regiment, which has just been precipitately withdrawn from what appeared to be a trap, the unit coming apart in the process: “When we ... saw the state of affairs, we broke ranks, became a disorganized mob, every fellow for himself and the Germans take the hindmost” (127). “The corporal without a word took up his belongings and made for the rear. He had had enough of war.... I looked across the ... valley ... and perfect streams of Yanks were making their way to safer country.... No one tried to stop them ... everyone was his own boss now”(130). That thin edge had finally given way. Many a *Summary of Operations*—the official accounts of divisions in World War I—notes the advance of a unit, notes

strong enemy reaction, and ends noting the return of the unit to its starting point without further commentary. This first struck me as odd, but the sequence is so commonplace among the records that one must assume everyone understood and no further explanation was necessary. Spared from further self-reflection, Baker finds himself suddenly drafted as a stretcher carrier and heads farther to the rear in company with several others. In such fashion units come apart, report horrific casualties, and some days later seem to stand roll call in unexpectedly large numbers. It is the stuff of war, frequently observed in the AEF and reflecting the helter-skelter fashion in which America went to war then. It was one of General Pershing's chief concerns, one he thought bore directly on the competence of the commander to control his men.

All in all, this is one of the most enjoyable memoirs of life inside the AEF in World War I that I have had the pleasure of reading.