

If any one is interested, I was born in
 Rochester Ind., the second child of Charles & Mary
 Baker, on Aug 5th 1896 - my older brother, Walter
 Willis was born in Wolcott Ind., in ~~Sept~~ Dec 3
 1894, my sister Madge at Otterbush Ind. 1900.

In 1901 we moved to a farm 8 miles south west
 of Wolcott Ind. then I started to school in the
 fall of 1902. a small country school having three
 of us in the first grade. I went to this school
 until December, when we moved to another
 farm a mile and a quarter south west of
 Wolcott and I was transferred to, what to me
 was a very large school having 8 rooms in-

PART OF A PAGE FROM KENNETH BAKER'S MEMOIR, COMPOSED IN THE 1980S

“Oatmeal and Coffee”: Memoirs of a Hoosier Soldier in World War I

*Edited and introduced by Robert H. Ferrell,
transcription and postscript by Betty Baker Rinker**

Kenneth Gearhart Baker (1896–1988), born in Rochester, Indiana, was a veteran of the two world wars of the century that has just ended, and in his last years, in the 1980s, he remembered the earlier one better than he did the later. By then removed to a retirement apartment in Florida, he began in 1984 to write his memories of the war of 1917–1918 and of the occupation of Germany in the early months of 1919. He wrote with a pencil on a yellow paper tablet, while sitting (so his daughter, Betty Baker Rinker, remembers) in the easy chair of his living room. By the time he finished he had completed virtually a small book. He died in 1988, and his daughter arranged in 1993 for his manuscript to be typed. She deposited a copy in the archives of the U.S. Army Military History Institute, a part of the Army War College in Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania, and it was there that the present editor found it.

The author of “Oatmeal and Coffee” was the second son of Hoosier farmer Charles Baker and his wife, Mary. After the family, including a younger sister, moved in 1901 to a farm southwest of Wolcott, Kenneth Baker attended country schools in White County until 1912, when the family moved to Monticello, the county seat, where Kenneth graduated from high school around 1915.

When the United States entered World War I, Baker and his friend Henry Brucker were enrolled in a technical training course for electricians at the Milwaukee College of Engineering. On May 8, 1917, they enlisted in the 1st Wisconsin Field Signal Battalion of the Wisconsin National Guard, which when taken into federal service became part of the Thirty-second (Michigan/Wisconsin) Division. This was the division with which Baker spent the remainder of his army service, except for five months in England when, having been hospitalized and left behind when his division moved on, he became a “casual,” i.e., a soldier not regularly attached to a unit.

After the war Baker returned to Indiana. He entered Purdue University in the autumn of 1919 and graduated with a degree in electrical engineering. He married his Purdue sweetheart, Bertha Walton,

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in 1921 and was employed for the rest of his life as a sales engineer with the Wagner Electric Company in Indianapolis, except for another stint in the army during World War II. Pearl Harbor brought him back into the military; he applied for a commission in the U.S. Army Air Forces and served as a base supply officer and an executive officer.

There is of course something nostalgic about reading Baker's account today, in a new century with World War I far in the past, beyond memory of most Indiana residents, and with only a small remnant of its veterans still alive—at last count the state's surviving vets numbered sixteen out of the tens of thousands of Hoosiers who took part in that war and who for so many years were leaders in the state, and, some of them, the nation. The entire generation that included Kenneth Baker and his contemporaries, those born in the 1890s, is nearly gone. American Legion parades of yesteryear, so familiar to later generations, are now far in the past. The toy trains with cars marked "40 & 8," representing the freight cars in France in which forty soldiers or eight horses were transported to the front, which appeared in the parades on Memorial Day, the Fourth of July, and Armistice Day, are no longer to be seen. Indeed Armistice Day, a staple celebration of some of us Hoosiers older than average, has now been translated into Veterans Day. If someone asked the average Indianan what day is or was the real Armistice Day, he or she would respond, probably, with surprise and almost surely without being able to relate the long-ago and for a while so-well-remembered date of what seemed established for eternity as the most important event in national and world history—the armistice declared in the eleventh minute of the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month in 1918.

World War I, begun in Europe in 1914, changed the history of Europe, America, and for that matter all nations and peoples of the world. In 1917 Americans hastily approved going to war. They had been shocked by the way in which imperial Germany had not merely plunged Europe into war two and one-half years earlier but had behaved so wantonly in sinking the great liner *Lusitania* in 1915 and then almost two years later defying the government of the United States by resuming the unrestricted use of submarines, an act that brought the American declaration of war.

All this was a prelude to the enlistment in the U.S. Army or acceptance of the draft by Kenneth Baker and so many other Americans, in hope of Germany's defeat and the survival, as they put it, of civilization itself.

How does Baker's memoir fit into the literature of American participation in World War I? Libraries now contain shelf upon shelf of accounts, and how important is his?

Its sources are difficult to detail. It is unclear how Baker managed to hold his experiences in 1917–1919 in his mind for nearly sev-

enty years. Like so many soldiers of his time he kept a diary, which was contrary to regulations. Unfortunately, his daughter reports, after he brought it home his horrified mother read it and destroyed it. But it is clear that, even without his diary, he did remember what, after all, may well have been the most impressive experience of his life. Until he reached nearly the end of his narrative he kept the chronology straight. (At the close he was apparently losing the ability to concentrate; he died not long after finishing it.) In seeking to end the account he also, one suspects, departed from chronology in order to include all sorts of miscellaneous experiences. His memory was no doubt aided by his copy of his division's history, published in 1920.¹ A post-World War II trip to England may have included France.

In one way Baker was not typical of American soldiers during World War I; while many of them found it intensely difficult to record their experiences, this soldier from Rochester somehow had learned to write in a straightforward way. He managed, with ease, to achieve a tight literary style. And he could introduce humor, in contrast to so many of the accounts of World War I that were sober to a fault.

In other ways he was typical of men of his time. He was a private all the way and never forgot that fact. He deeply resented the privileges of officers and especially the belief of so many officers that the men were too stupid to understand almost anything. Although he was an officer himself in World War II, Baker could not forget that he had been treated as though he were incompetent twenty-five years before. On occasion his narrative is bitter, and time after time he recites how he and his fellow "bucks"—buck privates—feigned stupidity, often to excellent effect. He also was typical in remembering the old saw that there is a right way to do something, a wrong way, and the army way. The procedures of the army struck him, as they did so many of his fellow soldiers, as peculiar to the point of idiocy. And he was immensely proud of how, when the action came, turning from warm to hot, the procedures of RHIP (rank has its privileges) dropped off, the bucks took over, and their judgment and heroism won the war—not the army's way.

Baker was justly proud of the Thirty-second Division. When the army expanded in World War I from a virtual constabulary of a little over one hundred thousand officers and men to a massive force of four million within a year and a half, West Pointers and other regulars continued to believe that they were the men who counted, the saving remnant. Feeling between regulars and National Guard officers and men ran high, and the more so because almost without exception senior guard officers lost their commands to regulars once troops arrived in France. Army talk was always of what the First

¹Joint War History Commissions of Michigan and Wisconsin, *The 32nd Division in the World War, 1917–1919* (Milwaukee, Wisc., 1920).

and Second divisions had done or could do, and it was said that National Guard divisions, such as the Thirty-second, were not as good. In fact the Thirty-second saw a great deal of action and performed very well, and they should have proved—the lesson was available but forgotten between the world wars—that the nonprofessionals were as good as the regulars.

The soldier memoirs of World War I are not easy to measure because there are so many of them. But it is difficult to find memoirs any better than Baker's. For Indiana the only comparable accounts are those of Elmer W. Sherwood, published as a narrative in 1919 and as a diary ten years later. Sherwood's books were announced as remarkable both by Booth Tarkington and in 1929 by General Charles P. Summerall, former commander of V Corps and by then chief of staff of the U.S. Army, although Sherwood's diary was bowdlerized so badly that it is in need of republication. The diary of Indiana's Elmer Frank Straub also stands high on any list of World War I books, although it begins slowly and takes on flair only toward the end. Among the several hundred unpublished memoirs and diaries now in the Military History Institute at Carlisle Barracks, Baker's clearly is superior.²

²See Elmer W. Sherwood, *Rainbow Hoosier* (Indianapolis, 1920?); Sherwood, *Diary of a Rainbow Veteran: Written at the Front by Elmer W. Sherwood* (Terre Haute, Ind., 1929); Elmer Frank Straub, *A Sergeant's Diary in the World War* (Indianapolis, 1923).