

THE VERY RARE 1890 PIONEER COLUMN BRITISH SOUTH AFRICA COMPANY GROUP TO A NEW ZEALAND-BORN ADVENTURER AND VETERAN OF MULTIPLE WARS AND EXPEDITIONS, WHO AS AN OFFICER, WOULD LATER SERVE IN MURRAY'S HORSE, FIELD INTELLIGENCE DEPARTMENT, JOHANNESBURG MOUNTED RIFLES DURING THE BOER WAR AND WITH THE AUSTRALIAN IMPERIAL FORCE DURING THE GREAT WAR

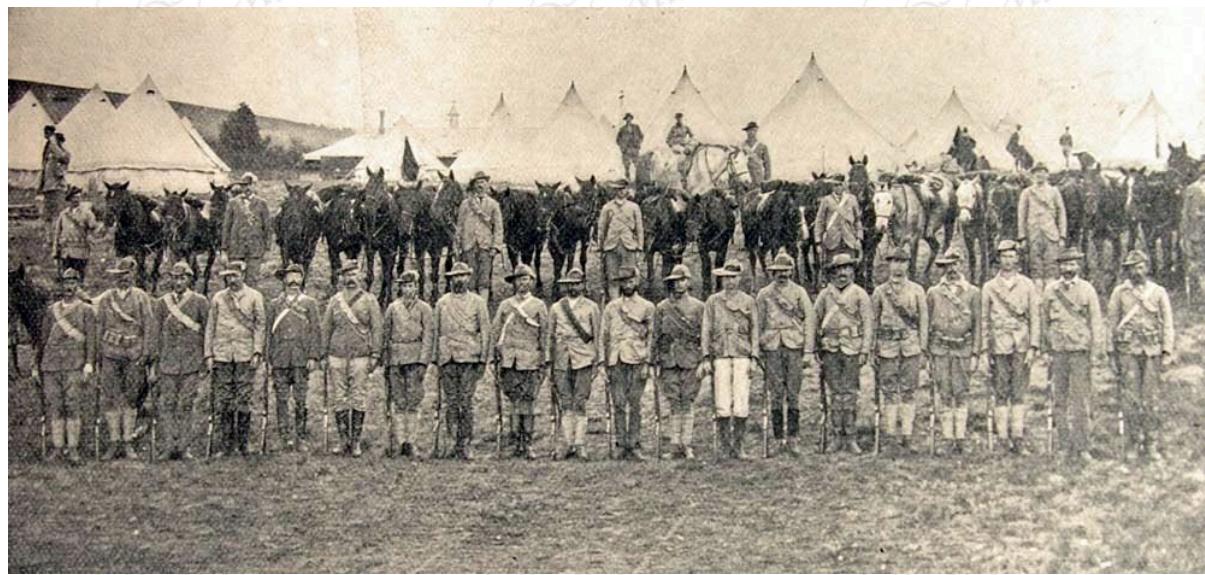


BRITISH SOUTH AFRICA COMPANY MEDAL 1890-97, REVERSE UNDATED, 1 CLASP, MASHONALAND 1890 'TPR. BAKER, W. H. V. - PIONEERS.'; QUEEN'S SOUTH AFRICA 1899-1902, 5 CLASPS, CAPE COLONY, TUGELA HEIGHTS, ORANGE FREE STATE, RELIEF OF LADYSMITH, TRANSVAAL 'LT. W. V. BAKER, F.I.D.'; KING'S SOUTH AFRICA 1901-02, 2 CLASPS, SOUTH AFRICA 1901, SOUTH AFRICA 1902 'LIEUT: W. V. BAKER. F.I.D.'; BRITISH WAR AND VICTORY MEDALS 'CAPT. W. V. H. BAKER. A.I.F.'

Walter Headland Valentine Baker was born on 15 February 1862 at Oamaru, Waitaki, Otago, New Zealand. Son of Andrew and Matilda Jane Baker (née Headland). Details of his early life are sketchy, but it is mentioned in his obituary (1940) that Baker went to sea, serving on the S.S. Dunedin during that vessel's pioneering voyage carrying frozen meat from New Zealand to the UK. Explaining how he went to Africa, Baker said he was third mate on a windjammer which, in 1883, foundered off the Cape. He was left stranded and made his way to Kimberley, where he got a job as an underground overseer at the Central Diamond Mine. Baker soon found himself in the Cape Colony, from where he served on Sir Charles Warren's expedition into Tswana country which resulted in the formation of British Bechuanaland.

In 1890 Baker was a member of the Pioneer Column which, along with the British South Africa Police under Cecil Rhodes, rode into Matabeleland and annexed land thus forming Southern Rhodesia (modern day Zimbabwe). The campaign for this was not authorised until 1927, with only around 200 issued. Of these just 88 were to members of the Pioneer Column, making this one of the rarer campaign medals. Baker was mentioned in the diary of Captain Henry Francis 'Skipper' Hoste:

'On July 23rd we had a capsize. I was doing rear guard with my troop, when Major Johnson rode up and told me to scrape up all the old sailors that I could find, as the wagon that carried the engine and boiler belonging to the electric searchlight had capsized crossing a donga. I accordingly left Beal in charge of the troops and, taking my brother Derick and a man called Valentine Baker, both old sailors, I went on to 'C' Troop where I borrowed the machine guns' crews, who were all sailors. We then went on to the wagon which we found with its wheels uppermost. We then turned to and cut down three large straight trees-fortunately there were plenty close by-and rigged up some sheer-legs. In a short time, we had the wagon the right side up again and found that the only damage done was a slight crack in the smokestack, which had been unshipped and lashed alongside the boiler. That was about the only serious capsize we had during the whole trip, though Sandy Tulloch and his Gardner gun used to capsize in about five sluits out of every ten. His idea was to rush them. In theory the idea was probably good, but in practice it generally ended in a capsize.'



Baker remained in Southern Africa, and during the 2nd Anglo-Boer War his valuable experiences in having lived in the region for around 15 years were soon put to good use. Baker initially served as a scout with Murray's Horse, seeing action at the Relief of Kimberley and serving as a scout for General Buller. Baker transferred to the Johannesburg Mounted Rifles on commission before transferring to the Field Intelligence Department.

Upon the outbreak of the Great War, Baker volunteered for service in 1915 with Australian Forces. He slashed six years off his age - stating he was a sprightly 47 - and was initially posted with 'F' Company, 4th Infantry Battalion with the Tropical Force stationed at Rabaul from November 1915 (no entitlement to 1914-15 Star for this Theatre). Taken sick, he was invalided in February 1916 but recovered and was posted to the 34th Infantry for service in France. Having served as a Captain from 1 August 1916, he was again sick with influenza and pleurisy at Armentieres in October 1916. Baker was permanently discharged in November 1917, the board commenting that whilst his stated age was 48, he 'appears much older'. He took discharge in England, his address shown as the Devonshire Club.

After the war Baker was extremely active in veterans' affairs in Birmingham. he also gave several interviews over BBC radio, recounting his numerous adventures in South Africa. During the 1930s he often gave lectures about his life and experiences (meeting and knowing Cecil Rhodes, Dr. Leander Starr Jameson and the famous scout, Courtney Selous).

Walter Valentine Baker died 16th May 1940 in Birmingham. His passing produced a number of obituaries:

"The death has taken place at the Dudley Road Hospital, Birmingham, of Major Valentine Baker, one of the founders of the South African War Veterans' Association in Birmingham. He was too, one of the 180 pioneers of Rhodesia, being present when, half a century ago, the British flag was hoisted in that country. At the relief of Ladysmith, 40 years ago, he was intelligence officer to General Buller. As a young man Major Baker spent much of his early life in South Africa. He served throughout the war in that country and had many stirring adventures. He had a rare fund of reminiscences concerning life among the Boers. In 1878, when homeward bound, he witnessed, in a gale, the wrecking in the English Channel of the Eurydice, at that time the largest wooden frigate in the British Navy. As a youth of 20 he also saw the calamity to the Princess Alice, a pleasure ship, outside the East India Docks. In each instance there was a heavy death-toll."

SOUTH AFRICAN WAR VETERANS



South African war veterans who took part in a march past at their association dance at the Palais de Danse, Edgbaston, last night. Major Valentine Baker, the chairman, is on the extreme right.

Baker's wife, Getrude Tidmarsh, some 24 years his junior, returned to Australia and died at Scarborough, Queensland in September 1975. Their daughter, Audrence Walter Baker died in 1976. Their only son, Barrie Baker, was killed in the Battle of Britain. Having seen action in the Fall of France with No. 264 Squadron, he was based at Hornchurch by August 1940. On 26 August Baker was flying with Flight Lieutenant A. J. Banham in Defiant L6985. Having just destroyed a Do17 over Thanet when they were attacked and shot down by Me109's off Herne Bay. Banham baled out but Baker was never found.





SOUTH AFRICAN WAR VETERANS' HELP

South African war veterans are helping recruiting in Birmingham by the introduction by Valentine Baker of a banner to be used in all the veterans' parades. Picture shows (left to right): Thomas Edwards (aged 84), who served in the Zulu War, 1879-1880, Valentine Baker, and Thomas Bailey (aged 80), who also served in the Zulu War.

Condition VF, lacquered. Sold with copy medal rolls, and A.I.F. Service records (digital), that latter confirming no entitlement to 1914/15 Star. Ex Spink April 2021, £3960 (including B/P)

A fine and rare group