

SIGNIFICANT AVIATOR & AVIATION EVENTS PROFILES

Thomas Charles Richmond Baker, DFC, MM and Bar

Pilot, No 4 Squadron (AFC)

Air Ace from Smithfield killed in combat one week before the Armistice

Thomas Charles Richmond Baker, DFC, MM and Bar, was born on 2 May 1897 in Smithfield, South Australia. The son of a school teacher, he was brought up in a farming community, and attended St Peters College in Adelaide, graduating in 1914. At school, Baker was a keen sportsman participating in rowing, tennis and football. He was also a member of the cadet corps. As a youth, he was enamoured with aviation and building model aircraft became his primary hobby.

Initially working in an Adelaide bank, he enlisted in the Australian Imperial Forces in July 1915. He departed Melbourne on 22 November 1915 as a Gunner in the 6th Field Artillery Brigade, on board HMAT Persic.

In July 1916, he arrived in France in time to participate in the Somme Offensive. On 16 December 1916, he demonstrated immense courage in an action near Gueudcourt where on four occasions he repaired a telephone line linking his forward observation post with headquarters under sustained German sniper fire and artillery barrage. His actions directly allowed the battery to correctly target and destroy the German forward trench. Commended for his great gallantry and devotion to duty, Baker was awarded the Military Medal.



Thomas Charles Richmond Baker as a Cadet. AWM

Following his interest in aviation, Baker transferred to the Australian Flying Corps in September 1917. He was quickly selected to undergo pilot training, graduating as a Second Lieutenant in June 1918. Posted to 4 Squadron, AFC, Baker completed his first combat mission on 23 June 1918 over France, quickly establishing himself as a daring pilot. On 31 July, Baker recorded his first victory when flying one of seven aircraft that intercepted seven German Fokker DVII aircraft. By early October 1918, Baker had claimed six aircraft earning recognition as an Ace. He was renowned for closing at close quarters and engaging the enemy at a mere 20 feet or less.

By late October 1918, he was promoted to Temporary Captain and made a Flight Commander. On 26 October, he led a formation of nine Sopwith Snipes against 15 German Fokker D-VII fighters. Two days later, Baker was credited with destroying three German aircraft from two separate sorties in the one day. The next day, leading a flight of five aircraft in a patrol of 15 aircraft, Baker fought in a wild aerial engagement involving more than 75 aircraft where he destroyed one aircraft. On the 30 October, he was again in a mass dogfight resulting in his twelfth victory. In a period of three torrid days, he had amassed five victories.

On 4 November 1918, No. 4 Squadron participated in a mass raid to harass the German retreat and bomb an airfield to the east of Leuze. A formation of 4 SQN Sopwith Snipes escorted the initial raid, and then protected the bombers as they returned to Allied lines. However, a patrol of twelve Fokkers shadowed the Snipes. After seeing the bombers off, the Snipes wheeled around to engage the German aircraft in a battle lasting several minutes. As the Snipes regrouped, they discovered three pilots were missing including Baker.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

H1 2861

CAPT Thomas Charles Richmond Baker in a 4 SQN Sopwith Camel. AWM

In a cruel and ironic way, Thomas Baker, a young 21-year-old three year veteran air ace was killed in action one week before the guns fell silent over the Western Front. It is believed he was the last Australian Flying Corps airman killed in action in the war. In only five months as an aviator, Baker had established himself as an Ace with 12 kills; eight of them over the formidable German fighter the Fokker DVII. In the last months of the war, he participated in some of the largest and most torrid aerial combat engagements of World War 1.

His Commanding Officer noted upon his death "He was one of the bravest officers I have ever had in this squadron."

He was later awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross to go with his two Military Medals – the Citation reading:

"Baker carried out forty low level raids on hostile troops, aerodromes etc and numerous offensive patrols... In all these operations he has shown exceptional initiative and dash, never hesitating to lead his formation against overwhelming odds nor shrinking from incurring personal danger."

Thomas Baker was buried in Escanaffles Communal Cemetery, Belgium. A stained-glass window at St John's Church of England in Halifax Street, Adelaide is dedicated to his memory. Located behind and to the left of the baptismal font, the window depicts a Roman Soldier with the dedication at the bottom of the window.



Images above and right: - Stained glass window and inscription, dedicated to CAPT Thomas Charles Richmond Baker DFC, MM and Bar Images Virtual War Memorial Australia.



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