

HEROISM OUTLASTS PREJUDICE

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The Saga of Vernon J. Baker



Castle Aghinolfi



Aside from those who saw a three-minute segment honoring living Medal of Honor recipients on “NBC Nightly News” last November, there are probably few Americans familiar with the wartime exploits of 1st Lt. Vernon J. Baker, who dis-

First Lt. Vernon J. Baker received the Distinguished Service Cross for heroism for service in Italy during World War II. Baker reverted to enlisted status when his commission expired and the Army demobilized its wartime force.

tinguished himself by extraordinary heroism at Castle Aghinolfi in Italy's northern Apennine Mountains during World War II. Denied the nation's highest military honor because of the Army's refusal to award black soldiers the Medal of Honor, Baker eventually became one of only seven black World War II soldiers to receive the coveted medal when President Bill Clinton recognized the achievements of all black servicemembers in a White House ceremony in 1997.

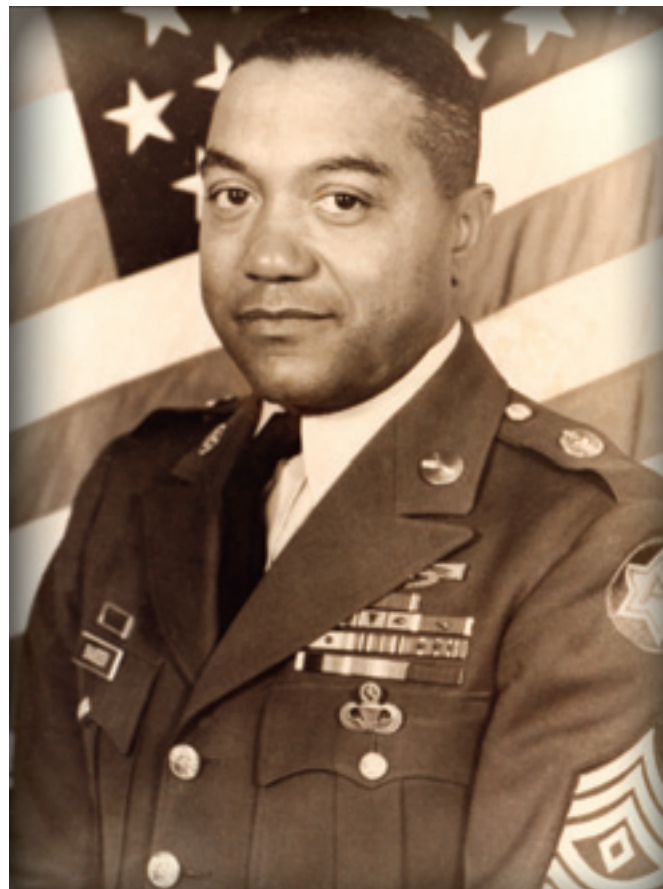
Vernon J. Baker was the unlikeliest of heroes. Orphaned at four, he was raised by his grandparents in Cheyenne, Wyo. The first time he walked into the recruiting office, a sergeant sitting behind the desk informed him, "We don't have any quotas for you people." Undeterred, Baker swallowed his pride and later returned to the recruiting office, where a different recruiter processed his enlistment. Within weeks, Baker arrived at Camp Wolters, Texas, in the summer of 1941. Because he was one of the few soldiers in his company who could read and write, Baker was assigned to company headquarters.

By the time the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor later that year, Baker was serving as the company supply sergeant. Because of his meritorious service, his regimental commander informed Baker that he was "volunteering" for Officer Candidate School (OCS) to fill the growing need for a cadre of black officers to command the rapidly expanding military force. Baker served in a segregated platoon in a white company, OCS Class 148. As did his fellow black candidates, Baker lived in a separate barracks, isolated from his white classmates except when he attended class.

Baker performed well, earning a commission as a second lieutenant and was posted to Arizona as a platoon leader in Dog Company, 25th Infantry Regiment. Later this unit evolved into Company C, 370th Infantry Regiment, when the 92nd Infantry (Buffalo) Division was reactivated. It was Maj. Gen. Edward M. Almond, a Virginian and an avowed racist, to whom the Army assigned command of the all-black division. It was commanded above platoon level by white officers who themselves considered such assignments as professionally demeaning.

Following corps field exercises outside Camp Polk, La., Almond announced that the Buffalo Division would join the Fifth U.S. Army in the Mediterranean Theater of Operations. The announcement came none too soon because by

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Provided by the author

mid-1944, the need for infantry replacements had increased tremendously as casualties had taken an excessive toll on the units serving in the forward battle areas. Consequently, the 92nd Infantry Division deployed to Italy in July with Baker's 370th Infantry Regimental Combat Team in the lead. Transshipping at Oran, the regiment arrived at Naples shortly thereafter.

In preparing for combat, Baker studied past missions and every manual he could find. For weeks, the platoon trained in an extinct volcano crater outside Naples. It was there that Baker got to know the platoon, and the platoon gradually took stock of its commander. Baker later recalled that if anything, "he got too close" to the men, acting as their mother and father, reading their letters to them and generally doing everything for them in order to develop the type of teamwork that he knew was essential for survival. Initially, the men were somewhat skeptical and suspicious of his paternal leadership style, but after the second patrol, in which they suffered a few casualties, the platoon coalesced around its leader. After months of constant patrolling, Baker had matured as a dynamic combat leader in the intense crucible of war. In October 1944, Baker himself suffered a wound that confined him to a field hospital through December.

Returning to his unit, Baker found himself the senior officer in the company until Capt. John F. Runyon and two additional white officers arrived in late March 1945 to occupy the senior leadership positions. In early April, Baker received word that the company was preparing for a "big

Col. Cole C. Kingseed with Vernon Baker at his cabin outside Saint Maries, Idaho, in 1998.



Provided by the author

push" to seize enemy defenses confronting the division. Reverting to weapons platoon leader just as he learned that Charlie Company would lead the next attack on Castle Aghinolfi, Baker again prepared his men for combat.

Baker's weapons platoon consisted of two mortar squads and two machine-gun squads, all of which were understrength. The objective was a small castle that sat atop a hill, anchoring one leg of what the Italian partisans called the "Triangle of Death." Used primarily as an artillery observation post, the castle dominated the coastal highway on the western end of the Gothic Line. The defensive line followed a natural barrier of rugged terrain that stretched across the Italian peninsula. Three previous attacks had met with unmitigated disaster. Now the 1st Battalion would get its turn, moving along similar routes as the preceding attacks. The assault was scheduled to begin before dawn on April 5. Fully 70 percent of Baker's men were replacements with little or no combat experience.

Awakened at 3 A.M., Baker discarded his combat helmet and his utilities and donned his dress uniform and his customary wool helmet liner. The day foreshadowed death, and if Baker was going to die, he "wanted to go up sharp." Wrapping two bandoliers of ammunition around his waist, he next attached four grenades to the pockets of his Eisenhower jacket. Baker remembered that he was lucky "to have 96 rifle rounds to take into battle." Next he grabbed his M1 rifle and instinctively rechecked it thoroughly.

Baker was ready for battle, but he was without the services of his senior noncommissioned officer. The preceding

evening, his platoon sergeant reported that he was going to the dispensary; hence he would be unavailable to join the platoon on the attack. Disgusted with the sergeant's cowardice, Baker dismissed him and told him to get the hell out of the platoon area. There would be no room for cowards on the upcoming attack.

Following an artillery preparation of 15 minutes, Baker's company crossed the line of departure at 5 A.M. on April 5 to seize the high ground around Castle Aghinolfi. Baker's weapons platoon followed the Second Platoon, which was close on the heels of the Third Platoon, three-fourths the way up the hill. Single file, rock to rock, Baker's men followed with .30-caliber light machine guns, 60 mm mortars and ammunition.

Initially, Charlie Company encountered little opposition as Baker advanced at the head of his platoon toward its objective. Castle Aghinolfi stood approximately 2 miles from the 370th Infantry Regiment's starting point. Moving more rapidly than the remainder of the company, Baker and about 25 men reached the south side of a draw, some 250 yards from the castle, within two hours. In reconnoitering for a suitable position to set up a machine gun, Baker observed two cylindrical objects pointing out of a slit in a mount at the edge of a hill. Crawling up and under the opening, he stuck his M1 into the slit and emptied the clip, killing the observation post's two occupants.

Moving to another position in the same area, Baker stumbled upon a well-camouflaged machine-gun nest, the crew of which was eating breakfast. He promptly shot and killed both soldiers.

After Capt. Runyon joined the group, a German soldier appeared from the draw and hurled a grenade, which

failed to explode. Baker was not exactly sure what happened next, but three things occurred simultaneously: The grenade landed 5 feet from him, bounced, but did not explode; Baker squeezed off two shots, slamming the German in the back; and Runyon disappeared. Borrowing a Thompson submachine gun from one of his squad leaders, Baker then proceeded into the draw alone. There he blasted open the concealed entrance of a second dugout with a hand grenade, shot one German soldier who emerged after the explosion, tossed another grenade into the dugout and entered, firing his submachine gun and killing two more Germans.

Leaving the dugout, Baker then returned to the summit of the hill, where he joined Runyon. There

the company commander informed Baker that in his absence the other men had been engaged in a hand-grenade battle. Meanwhile, the enemy began to “zero in” on the American position with heavy mortars, inflicting heavy casualties among the group of 25 soldiers around the two officers. The mortar position could not be located at the beginning of the barrage, but as the firing continued, one soldier, glancing up into the air, happened to see what appeared to be a flock of birds. The “birds” were actually a barrage of mortar shells that had just been fired from a position behind a demolished house on the adjacent hill.

Explosions followed in rapid succession, killing three of Baker’s men and wounding three others. Directing his forward observer to call for artillery support, Baker discovered that his regiment refused to fire because they could not believe that American forces were so close to the castle. After a heated discussion, regiment finally fired the support and temporarily quieted the German mortars. By then, Baker had suffered an inordinate number of casualties.

The Americans did not have long to wait before the Germans launched another counterattack at 2:30 P.M. As Baker directed the defense, he searched in vain for his company commander. Finally, one of his soldiers informed him that Runyon was in a stone house in an olive grove at the edge of the battlefield. Using the scant brush for concealment, Baker sprinted for the building. There he found Runyon sitting on the dirt floor, knees pulled up to his chest, arms wrapped around his legs. Just then another barrage fell on the company, and it completely unnerved Runyon. Directing Baker to cover his withdrawal and fighting to make his shaking voice sound flat and controlled, Runyon ordered, “Look, Baker, I’m going for reinforcements.”

“All right, Captain. We’ll be here when you get back,” Baker replied, knowing he would never see any reinforcements and not sure why his company commander was deserting his men for a job that any noncommissioned officer could do.

What happened next distinguished Baker as an exceptional combat soldier. With Runyon gone, he quickly collected the dog tags from his fallen soldiers and prepared for the inevitable German counterattack. An hour and a half after the initial request for

reinforcements, another mortar barrage fell in the area, followed by an attack by approximately a platoon of enemy soldiers disguised as medics and litter-bearers.

Approaching to within 50 meters of Baker’s command post under the protection of a Red Cross, the enemy dropped their disguise, took a machine gun from the litter and prepared to assault the remnants of the beleaguered American platoon.

Baker’s men immediately returned fire, routing the attacking force and leaving their dead and wounded upon the southern slope of the battalion objective. By this time, Baker’s effective strength totalled eight men, including the artillery forward observer. Down to a few clips per man and with no hope of reinforcements, Baker reluctantly ordered a withdrawal. It was the toughest decision he made, recalling that “my men wanted to stay, but I wanted to ensure some of them stayed alive.” Baker covered their withdrawal himself, killing one of four enemy soldiers who ventured to get a clearer picture of the front. The remaining Germans fled to the opposite side of the hill.

Waiting a few minutes to see if any more enemy appeared, Baker then moved out and joined the survivors. Nearing a demolished house, Baker’s survivors were spotted by an enemy mortar crew and immediately brought under indirect fire by a barrage of light mortars. One of his men was wounded, bringing the number in his party to seven. As Baker and his men moved forward another 300 yards, a sniper shot and killed the only medic with the platoon, decreasing their number to six.

Reaching the crest of a hill, Baker heard the explosions from two more grenades and discovered two additional machine-gun nests that the Americans had bypassed on their ascent to the castle. Directing one of his soldiers to cover him, Baker crawled to the positions and destroyed each with white phosphorous grenades, thus clearing the



way for his small party to safely evacuate their casualties to the battalion aid station. Totally exhausted from the day's ordeal, Baker turned, lowered himself to the side of the road and vomited. He had been in intense combat for 12 consecutive hours. In all, Baker personally accounted for nine dead enemy soldiers and the elimination of three machine-gun positions, an observation post and a dugout.

Unfortunately, Baker's tumultuous day was far from over. Standard operating procedures dictated that Baker deliver the dog tags from his fallen comrades to headquarters. Exhaustion again crept in and Baker fell asleep en route to the regimental command post. Ordinarily, a commander would give the tags to the intelligence officer, but instead Baker encountered Col. Raymond G. Sherman, the regimental commander. Unlike his battalion commander, Sherman had not earned the respect of the black officers and men in the 370th Infantry. He would later characterize the black troops as unreliable and prone to cowardice under fire.

Directing the intelligence officer to give Baker a helmet, Sherman continued, "Now that you're in uniform, lieutenant, I've got other news for you. The 473rd Infantry Regiment is taking over the advance to the castle tomorrow. They need somebody who knows the terrain. You're volunteering to lead them."

As ordered, Baker met a company commander from the 473rd Infantry Regiment, one of the white organizations assigned to the Buffalo Division in the recent reorganization. Briefing the commander, Baker retraced his steps along the path he had taken the previous day. Dead American and German soldiers littered the field. As Baker relived the thumping of mortar shells, the rat-a-tat of machine-gun fire and the dying cries of his men, not a single round was fired in anger as the Americans reached the deserted castle. Only the remnants of a heroic struggle remained. A few days later, Baker discovered that Runyon had recommended him for the Distinguished Service Cross.

Baker's shooting war ended the day his platoon fought the Germans to a standstill outside Castle Aghinolfi. Again he was glad of it—too many lives lost, too much suffering, too much death. As with most soldiers who experienced the intensity of combat, he was haunted by the memories of the fight at Castle Aghinolfi. Even today, he sees dead men on a hill and hears the screams of the wounded. He made it back alive, but 19 of his men remained on the hill.

Three months after the battle, Baker received the Distinguished Service Cross in a ceremony on the Fourth of July in Viareggio. It proved to be his last encounter with both Capt. Runyon and Gen. Almond in Italy. Fifth Army com-

mander Gen. Lucian Truscott presided. To Baker's chagrin, Runyon joined him on the reviewing stand. Both Almond and Runyon received awards of their own: Almond, oak leaf clusters on his Silver Star; Runyon, the Silver Star. True to form, Almond and Runyon assumed the positions of honor to the right of Baker, even though tradition dictated that the soldier receiving the highest award stand on the right of the line.

With the war over, Vernon Baker remained in Italy on occupation duty until February 1947. Taking six months leave, he reverted to enlisted status as master sergeant as his commission expired and the Army demobilized its wartime force. The next day, he appeared at the recruiting station and embarked on a new career as an Army photographer. Assigned to Fort Bragg, N.C., with the 82nd Airborne Division, Baker volunteered for combat duty with the 11th Airborne Division in order to regain his commission. He made his last jump at age 48, but never returned to combat.

Baker soldiered on, rising to command an all-white company in 1951 when his unit was finally desegregated.

Following the Korean War, Baker returned to the Signal Corps and photography. Without a college degree, he again relinquished his commission. Baker served an additional 13 years at Fort Ord, Calif., and was first sergeant of a training company.

Transferred to Germany, Baker again encountered racism as the Army coped with the socioeconomic problems of the Vietnam era. Rampant drug use compounded the disciplinary problems. For Baker it was enough. On August 31, 1968, he retired from the Army, having completed nearly three decades of distinguished service.

Jump ahead 29 years as President Clinton presents Baker the Medal of Honor in a White House ceremony. Former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Colin Powell, U.S. Army retired, hails Baker as an inspirational hero who helped pave the way for Powell to become the nation's top military officer. Baker accepts the award on behalf of the 1.2 million black Americans who served in World War II. Recalling his fallen comrades, Baker notes, "We've all been vindicated. Those that are not here with me, thank you, fellas, well done. I'll always remember you."

To this day, Baker uncomfortably wears his hero's mantle. He is more at home in the Idaho wilderness than he is receiving the public accolades that accompanied receipt of the nation's highest tribute for military heroism, but his deeds at Castle Aghinolfi, coupled with subsequent decades of selfless service, serve as quiet inspiration to future generations and as stark testimony that heroism outlasts prejudice. ★



Vernon Baker was the only living recipient of seven black World War II soldiers recommended to receive the Medal of Honor. He was presented the medal by President Bill Clinton in a 1997 White House ceremony.

National Archives