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Leading from the Front – Near Viareggio, Italy, 1945

In need of a job and wanting to serve his country, Vernon Baker enlisted in the Army in June 1941. He was assigned to the segregated 270th Regiment of the 92nd Infantry Division; it was the first black unit to go into combat in World War II, although not until late in the fighting and then under the command primarily of white officers. In June 1944, the 370th landed at Naples and fought its way north into central Italy. One evening in the fall, Baker, on night patrol, ran into a German sentry. In the duel that followed, Baker killed the German but was wounded so badly himself that he had to be hospitalized for two months.

In the spring of 1945, Lt. Baker -- the only black officer in his company-- was in command of a weapons platoon made up of two light-machine-gun squads and two mortar squads. His unit was near Viareggio on April 5 when it was ordered to launch a dawn assault against Castle Aghinolfi, a mountain stronghold occupied by the Germans. Moving ahead of the other platoons, Baker and his men had reached a shallow ravine about 250 yards below the castle at about 10:00 a.m. when they encountered heavy fire. As they took cover, Baker spotted a pair of cylindrical objects pointed up out of a mound in the hill above him. At first he thought they were flash suppressors for machine guns, but as he slithered closer, he realized they were observation scopes. He stuck his rifle into the slit of the observation post and emptied the clip, killing the two Germans who had been directing fire from the castle.

Moving forward, Baker stumbled on a well-camouflaged machine-gun nest and shot and killed the two soldiers manning it. The next moment, as Company C's commanding officer joined Baker, a German soldier appeared in the ravine and tossed a potato masher grenade, which came to rest at their feet. Luckily, it turned out to be a dud, and Baker shot the German as he tried to run. Spying a dugout quarried into the hillside, he blasted open the fortified entrance with a grenade, shot one enemy sniper who emerged after the explosion, then entered the dugout and killed two more.

By afternoon, German fire began to inflict heavy casualties on Baker's platoon. His captain ordered a withdrawal and left with his radioman as Baker covered their retreat. Then Baker and his men -- the six remaining of the 25 he had led into battle earlier -- began to make their way back down to the American lines. They ran into two more German machine-gun positions that had been bypassed during the assault. Baker used hand grenades to destroy them.

VERNON BAKER

*First Lieutenant, U.S. Army,
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BORN:

December 17, 1919 Cheyenne,
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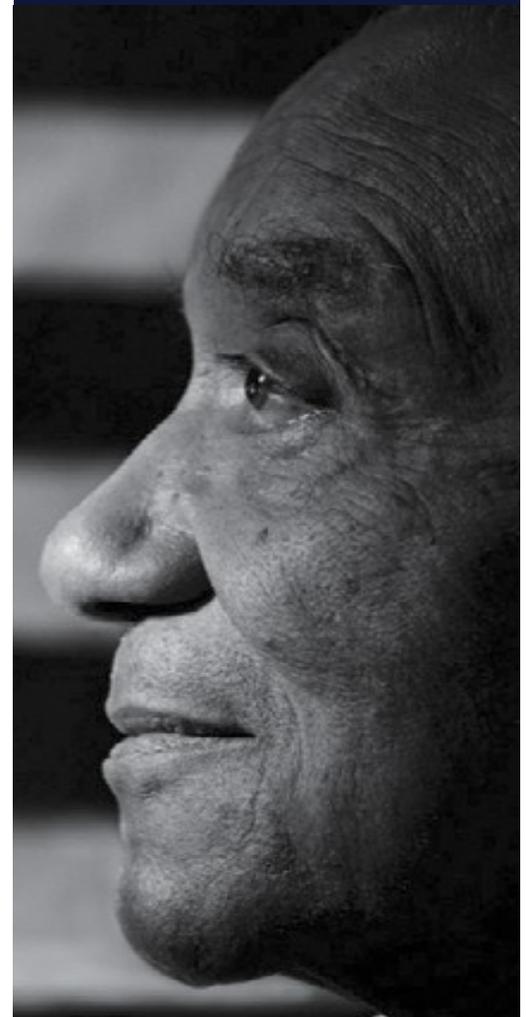
ENTERED SERVICE:

Cheyenne, Wyoming

BRANCH:

U.S. Army

DUTY:World War II





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The next day, Baker volunteered to lead a battalion assault on Castle Aghinolfi. On the way up the hill, he saw bodies of the 19 men he had lost the day before, all of them barefoot because the Germans had taken their shoes and socks during the chilly night. Picking their way through minefields and heavy fire, the Americans finally routed the Germans and secured the position at the top of the mountain.

Vernon Baker was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross in July 1945, and remained in the military until 1968. In March 1996, more than 50 years after the assault on Castle Aghinolfi, he received a telephone call from a man working on a federal grant to reevaluate heroism of blacks in World War II. Extensively interviewed about the events of April 5 and April 6, 1945, he then learned that he was to be awarded the Medal of Honor. When President Bill Clinton presented him with the medal on January 13, 1997, Vernon Baker became the only living black serviceman from World War II to receive this honor.