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6th grade

Vernon Baker - A War Hero

Throughout history, African Americans have suffered horrendous cruelty. However, certain brave individuals blazed a trail for all, and some of their instrumental work occurred in times of war. In World War II, many African Americans were looking for an opportunity to serve their country, and one man of the name Vernon Baker did just that. Born in 1919, he and his two sisters were orphaned by the age of four and raised by their grandparents. Vernon first joined the Army at the age of 22 and graduated training as a second lieutenant after showing great leadership potential. He was then sent to Naples, Italy with a segregated regiment. While in Naples, Baker was on night patrol when he stumbled upon a German sentry and was shot in the arm. He recovered in a hospital ward that was segregated, something unfortunately too common.

In the spring of 1945, his regiment was called to the front. On April 5th, Baker and his companions were located at Castle Aghinolfi in Italy when they were ordered to launch an attack on a German stronghold. While the soldiers were setting up a machine gun near the castle, Lieutenant Baker noticed the barrel of a gun hidden in the hillside, which turned out to be a German machine gun position. As he and his men went back to the rest of their regiment, the Germans opened fire and inflicted heavy casualties. Soon after, Baker blasted open the entrance to a hillside dugout with a grenade. He shot and killed the three men inside.

The massive size of the German army soon became a pressing issue as his regiment suffered heavy losses. Baker's commander asked for reinforcements, but they never arrived and a retreat was ordered. Lt. Baker helped his men to safety in the midst of the fighting and destroyed two machine gun positions. The following day, Baker, showing great bravery, offered to lead an assault on the castle. While the exact details are disputed, it seems that he led his men through heavy fire and active minefields to take back the stronghold. In the end, the charge was successful.

Lt. Baker was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, the Bronze Star Medal, the Purple Heart,

and later the Congressional Medal of Honor in 1997. The former U.S. Rep. Walt Minnick described Lt. Baker's impact best when he stated, "He demonstrated a degree of courage few people have. He was prepared to give his life for his country — a country in which he was considered a second-class citizen." No African Americans were awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor during World War II, and Vernon Baker was the only living African American to receive it. His leadership and bravery were astounding and paved a way for other African Americans to be recognized for their deeds.

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