



SGT. THOMAS BAKER

MEDAL OF HONOR RECIPIENT

This Month in NCO History

July 7, 1944 — To the End at the Battle of Saipan

Pablo Villa

Sgt. Thomas Alexander Baker had two requests for the fellow Soldier who was trying to carry him to safety during the waning days of the fierce Battle of Saipan.

“Get the hell away from me!” Baker reportedly exclaimed from his position propped up against a tree. “I’ve caused enough problems. Gimme your .45.”

The Soldier obliged, handing his pistol to the wounded Baker, who had insisted he be left at the foot of a bougainvillea tree after one previous rescue attempt resulted in the Soldier who was carrying Baker being felled by Japanese bullets. Baker refused to be moved any farther, instead asking to be placed in a sitting position with a weapon to defend himself.

Baker’s arduous circumstance came July 7, 1944, two days before the end of the Battle of Saipan. The fight began June 15 and was part of the Mariana Islands campaign in which American forces attempted to neutralize Japanese bases in the central Pacific. It ended after 24 brutal days of combat that culminated with up to 5,000 sake-soaked Japanese soldiers taking part in a banzai charge that inflicted heavy casualties on the 105th

Infantry Regiment of the 27th Infantry Division along with the 2nd and 4th Marine Divisions. The Americans secured the island July 9.

By the time the Japanese suicide attack occurred, then-Pvt. Baker had already displayed the bravery that would earn him the nation’s highest military honor.

On June 19, according to his Medal of Honor citation, Baker was serving with A Company of the 105th Infantry Regiment when he grabbed a bazooka and advanced ahead of his unit, which was pinned down by small-arms fire. He fired the weapon into a Japanese emplacement and killed all 12 within. Several days later, Baker voluntarily took a rear guard position to cover his unit’s advancement across open terrain. He took out two enemy pockets manned by two officers and 10 soldiers hiding behind American lines. Later, he came upon six enemy soldiers lying in wait to ambush the Americans. Baker shot all six in seconds.

Weeks later, as the banzai attack began, Baker dug into a foxhole and opened fire with his M1 rifle, dropping scores of Japanese soldiers. He remained in his position despite being wounded early in the offensive.

When his ammunition was exhausted, Baker wielded his rifle like a baseball bat in hand-to-hand combat until it burst into pieces. He was carried by a comrade 50 yards to the rear before the would-be rescuer was wounded. Baker refused to be moved any farther and made his demand for a firearm amid the cacophony of Japanese yells and whizzing bullets. The weapon given to Baker had eight rounds.

When American forces retook the position the following day, they found Baker's body in the same seated position, with his gun empty and eight Japanese soldiers lying dead before him.

Baker, a Troy, N.Y., native, was posthumously promoted to sergeant and awarded the Medal of Honor on May 9, 1945. He was buried at Gerald B.H. Solomon Saratoga National Cemetery in Schuylerville, N.Y. ■



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