[](http://www.biography.com/people/vernon-j-baker-403080)

**Vernon J. Baker Biography**

Military Leader (1919–2010)

**QUICK FACTS**

**NAME**

Vernon J. Baker

**OCCUPATION**

[Military Leader](http://www.biography.com/people/groups/military-leaders)

**BIRTH DATE**

[December 17](http://www.biography.com/people/groups/born-on-december-17), [1919](http://www.biography.com/people/groups/born-1919)

**DEATH DATE**

[July 13](http://www.biography.com/people/groups/died-on-july-13), [2010](http://www.biography.com/people/groups/died-2010)

**PLACE OF BIRTH**

[Cheyenne](http://www.biography.com/people/groups/birth-city-cheyenne), [Wyoming](http://www.biography.com/people/groups/born-in-wyoming)

Vernon Baker was a highly decorated soldier and the only living black WWII veteran to earn the Congressional Medal of Honor.

**Synopsis**

In 1941, Vernon Baker was assigned to the segregated 270th Regiment of the 92nd Infantry Division, the first black unit to go into combat in WWII. Baker, one of the most decorated black soldiers in the Mediterranean Theater, earned a Purple Heart, Bronze Star and Distinguished Service Cross. In 1996, he was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor.

**Profile**

Military personnel, Medal of Honor recipient. Born December 17, 1919. Vernon J. Baker was orphaned at age four and raised by his grandparents in Cheyenne, Wyoming - a town that had just a dozen other black families. During his adolescence, he spent two years at Father Flanagan's Boys Home in Omaha, Nebraska. He graduated from high school in Iowa, and began work as a railroad porter.

In the summer of 1941, Baker had finally grown tired of his life on the railroad, and enlisted in the Army that June. He was assigned to the segregated 270th Regiment of the 92nd Infantry Division, the first black unit to go into combat in World War II. After completing officer candidate school, he was commissioned on January 11th, 1943.

In June 1944, the 270th 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, 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 5th when it was ordered to launch a dawn assault against Castle Aghinolfi, a mountain stronghold occupied by the Germans. On the second day of the assault, Baker led a battalion that finally secured the mountain for the American soldiers.

Baker earned a Purple Heart, Bronze Star, and Distinguished Service Cross during his time in service. He remained in the military until 1968, lived through its desegregation, and became one of the first blacks to command an all-white company. He joined the U.S. Army Airborne along the way, and trained to be a military parachutist. He made his last jump at age 48.

In 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 the heroism of blacks in World War II. During this phone call Baker learned he was to be awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor.

On January 13th, 1997, 52 years after Baker's World War II military service, President Clinton presented him with the Medal of Honor, the nation's highest decoration for battlefield valor. He was one of the most highly decorated black soldiers in the Mediterranean Theater. He was also the only living black World War II veteran to earn the Medal of Honor.

After retiring from the Army, he spent nearly 20 years working for the Red Cross. He lived in Northern Idaho with his wife, Heidy until he died on July 13, 2010 after a long battle with cancer.