

**'I Knew Things Would Get Better'**  
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Vernon Baker said that as a young first lieutenant during World War II, he had a job to do and he did it. Being honored for it never occurred to him. On the morning of April 5, 1945, Baker led 25 American soldiers to an Italian hillside castle occupied by enemy forces. He destroyed four machine gun posts, killed nine German soldiers and drew enemy fire to enable his comrades' escape.

When he received the Medal of Honor from President Clinton on Jan. 13, Vernon Baker of St. Maries, Idaho, gave a verbal salute to the six other honorees who did not live to share this moment of glory. "The only thing that I can say to those that are not here with me is thank you, fellas, well done," said Baker, who at age 77 became the first and only living black man to receive the nation's highest award for bravery during World War II. It was not until 1993 that Army investigators responded to requests from black veterans and examined army records; the climate of racism in America, they concluded, was the reason the extraordinary heroics of these men were ignored for so long.

After the ceremony, Baker told *The New York Times* that he was an angry young man 50 years ago. He was serving in a segregated army for a country that denied rights to millions of its citizens. Yet in spite of everything, he maintained his dignity and did his job.

"My personal thoughts were that I knew things would get better," he said. "And I'm glad to say that I'm here to see it."

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