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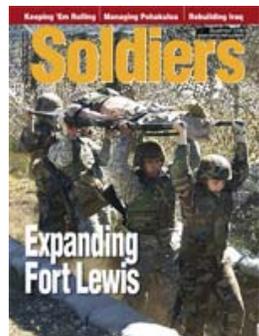
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Seven WWII vets to receive Medals of Honor,

By S. H. Kelly

WASHINGTON, DC (Army News Service, Jan. 13, 1997) -- Former 1st Lt. Vernon J. Baker, of St. Maries, Idaho, is one of seven black World War II veterans scheduled to be presented Medals of Honor Jan. 13 by President William Clinton, making them the only black recipients of the medal for World War II.

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Receiving the medals posthumously:

Maj. Charles L. Thomas, of Detroit

First Lt. John R. Fox, of Cincinnati, Ohio

Staff Sgt. Ruben Rivers, of Oklahoma City, Okla.

Staff Sgt. Edward A. Carter Jr., of Los Angeles

Pfc. Willy F. James Jr., of Kansas City, Mo.

Pvt. George Watson, of Birmingham, Ala.

Where possible, family members accepted the honors for the deceased soldiers.

With the exception of Rivers, who was previously awarded the Silver Star, they were all recipients of Distinguished Service Crosses, the nation's second-highest award for valor in combat. The Silver Star is the third-highest.

The presentations, according to Clinton, are taking place because due recognition was not accorded these soldiers earlier. To recognize them now, Congress authorized a statute of limitations waiver that for them had expired in 1952. The seven veterans were also scheduled to be inducted to the Pentagon's Hall of Heroes in a Monday afternoon ceremony hosted by Army Chief of Staff General Dennis J. Reimer.

In 1943, because Supreme Allied Commander Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower felt that not enough Medals of Honor were being awarded, he upgraded a number of Distinguished Service Award recommendations to Medal of Honor recommendations.

There is also precedent for waiving the statute of limitation. In 1991, black



World War I veteran Cpl. Freddie Stowers, who served with the 93rd Infantry Division, got the Medal of Honor by virtue of a waiver 73 years after his death. Stowers had been cited posthumously for leading his squad in an attack against entrenched mortar and machine-gun positions in France that had caused more than 50 percent casualties in his company. He was killed in the assault. His is the only Medal of Honor presented to a black service member for World War I.

The presentations are the result of a study by Shaw University, in Raleigh, N.C., which was contracted by the Army in 1993 to determine if there was a racial disparity in the way Medal of Honor recipients were selected. Out of 432 presented for World War II, none went to any of more than a million blacks who served.

Shaw found that there was disparity, and said the political climate and Army practices during the war guaranteed that no black soldier would receive the military's top award. The seven were among those members of the study group thought had performed to the Medal of Honor's "above and beyond the call of duty" standard.

While no documentary evidence could be found among military records of any blacks being recommended for the Medal of Honor, former Capt. David Williams, a white officer attached to the 761st Tank Battalion, told reporters he recommended Rivers for one in 1944.

Shaw University's 10 recommendations were forwarded to a board of generals at the Pentagon. These seven were selected from the list.

(Editor's Note: Information for the individual vignettes below as well as that for the related articles was compiled by S.H. Kelly, Public Affairs Office, U.S. Army Military District of Washington.)

VERNON JOSEPH BAKER was a 24-year-old second lieutenant at the time of the action for which he was cited near Viareggio, Italy. Orphaned since 4 years old, he had enlisted six months before the United States entered World War II and was commissioned Jan. 11, 1943, through officer-candidate school.

Also in the 92nd Infantry Division, Baker was assigned to Company C, 370th Infantry Regiment. He destroyed three machine-gun positions and an observation post April 5, 1945, and covered the evacuation of his unit's wounded.

The next day he led his battalion's advance through enemy minefields and heavy fire as the division assaulted its objective.

Summary of Service: Enlisted, 26 June 1941; Commissioned, 11 Jan 1943; Retired, August 1965 as a First Sergeant.

Awards and decorations: Medal of Honor (as of Sept. 23, 1996); Bronze Star Medal; Purple Heart; American Defense Service Medal; American Campaign Medal; European-African-Middle Eastern Campaign Medal; World War II Victory Medal; Combat Infantryman Badge; Croce Al Valor Militaire (Foreign Decoration).

Medal of Honor Citation: For extraordinary heroism on April 5 & 6 1945 near Viareggio, Italy. When his company was stopped by the concentrated fire from several machine guns emplacements, he killed nine Germans, destroyed four machine guns post, occupied an exposed position and drew enemy fire allowing his company personnel to evacuate. On the following night LT. Baker voluntarily led a battalion through enemy mine fields and heavy fire.

EDWARD ALLEN CARTER JR. earned his Medal as a member of a unique type of organization -- the Seventh Army Infantry Company Number 1

(Provisional), 56th Armored Infantry Battalion, 12th Armored Division near Speyer, Germany.

The provisional companies generally were established during, and in the wake of, the Battle of the Bulge, which took place during the winter of 1944-45. Black support and combat-support soldiers, and some whites, were allowed to volunteer for combat duty and were given training in small-unit tactics. Formed into provisional units, they were used to augment depleted divisions.

The father of two sons, Carter had entered the Army Sept. 26, 1941, and by March 23, 1945, was a 28-year-old infantry staff sergeant. On that day, the tank on which he was riding was hit by bazooka fire. Dismounted, Carter led three soldiers across an open field. In the process, two of the men were wounded and the other seriously wounded.

Carter continued alone and was wounded five times before being forced to take cover.

Eight German soldiers tried to capture him, but he killed six and captured the remaining two. These he used as a shield from enemy fire as he recrossed the field. His prisoners provided valuable information on enemy-troop disposition for his unit.

Carter left the Army in 1945 and died Jan. 30, 1963.

Summary of Service: Entered, 26 September 1941; Discharged, 30 September 1945.

Awards and Decorations: Medal of Honor (as of 23 September 1996); Bronze Star Medal; Purple Heart; Army Good Conduct Medal; American Defense Service Medal; European-African-Middle Eastern Campaign Medal; World War II Victory Medal; Combat Infantryman Badge.

Medal of Honor Citation: For extraordinary heroism on March 23, 1945, near Speyer, Germany. When the tank he was riding received heavy bazooka and small arms fire, Sgt. Carter voluntarily attempted to lead a three-man group across an open field. Two of his men were killed and the third seriously wounded. Continuing on alone, he was wounded five times and finally was forced to take cover. As eight enemy riflemen attempted to capture him, Sgt. Carter killed six of them and captured the remaining two. He then crossed the field, using as a shield his two prisoners from whom he obtained valuable information concerning the disposition of enemy troops.

JOHN ROBERT FOX was a first lieutenant assigned to Cannon Company, 366th Infantry Regiment, 92nd Infantry Division in Sommocolonia, Italy, when he earned his Medal Dec. 26, 1944.

Enemy soldiers dressed as civilians had infiltrated the town that elements of the regiment occupied the night before. The Germans began a full-scale attack about 4 a.m., under an artillery barrage. Outnumbered, the infantry force withdrew, but Fox and his observer party chose to remain on the second floor of a house to direct friendly artillery fire.

By 8 a.m. the attack had progressed to the point where he called in fire near, then onto his own position -- demanding it over the objections of the artillery unit. His body was later found among those of about 100 German soldiers.

After the war, a monument was erected in the city to honor eight Italians killed in the barrage, and one American soldier -- Fox.

Summary of Service: Entered, 28 February 1941; Killed in Action, 26 December 1944; buried in Colebrook Cemetery in Whitman, Massachusetts.

Awards and Decorations: Medal of Honor (as of 23 September 1996); Bronze Star Medal (Posthumously); Purple Heart (Posthumously); American Defense

Service Medal; European-African-Middle Eastern Campaign Medal; World War II Victory Medal (Posthumously); Combat Infantryman Badge.

Medal of Honor Citation: For extraordinary heroism on December 26, 1944 near Sommocolonia, Italy. While serving as a member of Cannon Company, 366th Infantry Regiment, 92nd Infantry Division. Being greatly outnumbered, most of the U.S. infantry forces were forced to withdraw from the town, but LT. Fox and some other members of his observer party voluntarily remained on the second floor of a house to direct defensive artillery fire. After acknowledging the danger, LT. Fox insisted ALL fire power be directed at him, as this was the only way to defeat the attacking enemy soldiers. Later, when a counterattack retook the position from the Germans, LT. Fox's riddle body was found along with bodies of approximately 100 German soldiers.

WILLY F. JAMES JR., who enlisted in the Army Sept. 11, 1942, was assigned to Company G, 413th Infantry Division, 104th Infantry Division near Lippoldsberg, Germany, at the time he earned the Medal. As lead scout during a maneuver to secure a bridgehead, he was pinned down for more than an hour by enemy machine-gun fire.

When he was able to return to his platoon, he used his observations to help work out a new assault plan and designated targets from memory in the new attack. He was killed by machine-gun fire while going to the aid of his fatally wounded platoon leader.

Summary of Service: Enlisted, 11 September 1942; Killed in Action, 8 April 1945; buried in American Battle Monument Cemetery - Netherlands

Awards & Decorations: Medal of Honor (as of 23 September 1996); Bronze Star Medal (Posthumously); Purple Heart (Posthumously); Army Good Conduct Medal (Posthumously); European-African-Middle Eastern Campaign Medal; World War II Victory Medal (Posthumously); Combat Infantryman Badge.

Medal of Honor Citation: For extraordinary heroism on April 7, 1945, near Lippoldsberg, Germany. As lead scout during a maneuver 'Pvt. James was the first to draw enemy fire. He was pinned down for over an hour, during which time he observed enemy positions in detail. Returning to his platoon, he assisted in working out a new plan of maneuver. He then led a squad in the assault, accurately designating targets as he advanced, until he was killed by enemy machine gun fire while going to the aid of his fatally wounded platoon leader.

RUBEN RIVERS entered the Army Jan. 15, 1942, and was a staff sergeant in Company A, 761st Tank Battalion (Colored) Nov. 16, 1944, near Guebling, France.

During an advance on the town that day, Rivers' tank hit a mine, and the sergeant was wounded in the leg. Refusing evacuation, Rivers directed his tank's fire on enemy positions for three days.

On the fourth day, Nov. 19, Rivers joined Company A's advance toward the town, but the unit was again stopped by enemy fire. Rivers' tank, joined by another, covered the company's withdrawal. During the battle, Rivers' tank was hit. He was killed and his crewmen were wounded.

Summary of Service: Entered, 15 January 1942; Killed in Action, 19 November 1944; buried in the American Battle Monument Cemetery - France.

Awards and Decoration: Medal of Honor (as of 23 September 1996); Silver Star; Purple Heart (Posthumously); Army Good Conduct Medal (Posthumously); European-African-Middle Eastern Campaign Medal; World War II Victory Medal (Posthumously); Presidential Unit Citation.

Medal of Honor Citation: For extraordinary heroism on November 16 - 19, 1944. Staff Sergeant Rivers tank was hit by a mine while advancing toward Guebling, France. Severely wounded in the leg he refused treatment and evacuation, took command of another tank, and advanced with his company. Repeatedly refusing evacuation, Sgt. Rivers continued to direct his tank's fire at enemy positions for three days. On the morning of the 19th November Sgt. Rivers opened fire on the enemy tanks, covering Company A as they withdrew. While doing so, Sgt. Rivers' tank was hit killing him and wounding the crew.

CHARLES LEROY THOMAS (photo not available) was a first lieutenant in Company C, 614th Tank Destroyer Battalion (Towed), 103rd Infantry Division, when he was cited for leading a task force storming Climbach, France, Dec. 14, 1944. Thomas' armored scout car was knocked out by enemy fire and he was wounded.

The lieutenant helped his crew out of the vehicle, but as he left the car's protection, he was again wounded in the chest, legs and left arm. Despite his wounds, Thomas directed the dispersal and emplacement of two antitank guns, which then returned fire.

He briefed one of his platoon leaders, a junior lieutenant, on the general situation, and only when he was sure the situation was under control did he allow himself to be evacuated. He left service as a major in 1947.

Summary of Service: Inducted, 20 Jan 1942; Commissioned, 11 March 1943; Discharged, 10 Aug 1947

Awards and Decorations: Medal of Honor (as of 23 September 1996); Purple Heart; European-African-Middle Eastern Campaign Medal; World War II Victory Medal.

Medal of Honor Citation: For extraordinary heroism on December 14, 1944, near Climbach, France. LT. Thomas armored scout car was subjected to intense enemy artillery, self-propelled gun, and small arms fire. Wounded by the initial burst of hostile fire, LT. Thomas signaled the remainder of the column to halt and despite the severity of his wounds, assisted the crew to obtaining cover. Upon leaving the scant protection which the vehicle afforded, LT. Thomas again was subjected to a hail of enemy fire which inflicted multiple gunshot wounds in his chest, legs, and left arm. Despite the intense pain LT. Thomas ordered and directed the dispersion and emplacement of two antitank guns which effectively returned the enemy fire. He refused to be evacuated until he was certain his junior officer was in full control of the situation.

GEORGE WATSON (photo not available), the only one of the seven to earn his medal while serving in the Pacific Theater.

He had entered the Army Sept. 1, 1942, and was a member of the 2nd Battalion, 29th Quartermaster Regiment. He was a passenger aboard the Dutch steamer (USAT) Jacob March 8, 1943, which was near Porloch Harbor, New Guinea, when the ship was hit by Japanese bombers.

When the ship was abandoned, Watson remained in the water and, instead of trying to save himself, assisted soldiers who could not swim into life rafts.

Weakened by his exertions, he was dragged down by the suction of the sinking ship and drowned.

His body was never recovered, but a field was named in his honor at Fort Benning, Ga.

Summary of Service: Entered, 1 September 1942; Killed in Action, 8 March 1943.

Awards and Decorations: Medal of Honor (as of 23 September 1996); Purple Heart; Army Good Conduct Medal; Asiatic-Pacific Campaign Medal; World War II Victory Medal.

Medal of Honor Citation: (Not available at time this file posted. Information expected to be available after 10:30 a.m. 13 Jan 96, at which time this post will be updated.)

By S.H. Kelly

MDW News Service

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