

Henry T. Baker, Narrator

New York State Military Museum
Interviewer Wayne Clark

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Springs, NY

INT: Sir, for the record could you state your full name and date and place of birth, please.

HB: Henry Ten Eyck Baker, born in Utica, grew up in Johnstown, NY, date of birth
October 5, 1924.

INT: Did you attend school in Johnstown?

HB: I graduated from Johnstown High School. I attended Yale University for freshman
year on a full scholarship. I left at the end of the year to join the service with a guarantee
that my scholarship would be there when I returned.

INT: So you ended up going in the service in April 1943?

HB: Right.

INT: Where did you go for your basic training?

HB: We went to Camp [Brooklyn?] and then I was sent to the Air Corps in Atlantic City.
Had my Basic in Atlantic City, then they came up with the Army Specialized Training
Program (ASTP) which I declined to join but they sent me anyway. The country realized
that that was not a sensible program, you had to have a year of college if you were white,
if you were black you had to have a college degree. So consequently we had a group of
300 men with 30 very very bright black boys. It was a great experience that way because
I learned bridge from a tech sergeant in that group.

INT: How long were you in that program?

HB: A few months, maybe one term of college.

INT: Where was that?

HB: We were stationed in Brooklyn, we went to Brooklyn Poly. That broke up because it
wasn't producing anything worthwhile really, somebody who already has college doesn't
need to repeat and so forth. From there we went to the Infantry for maneuvers in
Louisiana, the 75th Infantry Division.

INT: What was that like?

HB: It was quite a jolt from steam-heated apartments to the wilds of Louisiana. It was a rude awakening. [laughs]

INT: What time of year was that?

HB: In the spring.

INT: Was it all outside training?

HB: Yes, it was all combat maneuvers. We're coming in pretty well out of condition but we caught up. We went from the maneuvers in Louisiana to Camp Breckenridge, Kentucky for our advanced training before we went overseas. We were there through the summer of '44 at Camp Breckenridge and we left in the fall for Europe.

INT: How did you get over there?

HB: On a very large ship. Not in a convoy, we went by ourselves. We picked up escorts here and there on the way over.

INT: The whole division?

HB: The whole division went on one ship and that was unusual. We came into Swansea, Wales and trained at Camp Angle in Wales until late November and then we were sent into Europe. We were originally scheduled for occupation, the whole division, but with the Bulge they had to have troops so we got converted to combat infantry.

INT: You ended up in the Battle of the Bulge.

HB: We ended up in the clean-up of the Bulge.

INT: Before we get to that, when did you first get involved with combat?

HB: It was then. We came into Manhay, Belgium and that was our first on line experience.

INT: Was your clothing and equipment adequate at that point?

HB: No. We were still in overshoes. We didn't get boots until well into the combat and consequently we all had frozen feet. We did get combat boots finally; there was a good foot of snow on the ground.

INT: That was your first contact with the German Army?

HB: Yes.

INT: How long were you on the line for?

HB: We stayed on the line for most of the rest of the time. The only time we were off, they would move us to another sector. We went in at Grand Halleaux, Belgium where we got our first real combat.

INT: Do you want to tell us about that?

HB: We relieved the 82d Airborne in Grand Halleaux and we got our first really heavy combat. [loudspeaker announcement blocking HB] From Grand Halleaux we continued on through Belgium and we were closing up the Bulge; that was our main objective. Then we got switched from there to the Netherlands, on the Maas River, and we did a lot of combat patrols across the Maas. We were moved later to southern France around Nancy and the fortified city there that we took. The company's heaviest losses were in southern France, in February of '45.

INT: Were most of those losses direct combat or from artillery barrages?

HB: Both. The worst day was artillery barrages because we were the reserve company and we got really blown away.

INT: You were wounded?

HB: No, I was never wounded. I was one of two men of the original company that never left the line.

INT: You did have a knee injury?

HB: I got hit with a piece of flak shrapnel on my knee, knocked me down, all 240 pounds, but it didn't break anything. At 20 years old, you just keep going, you don't pay any attention to it. My company commander was wounded and came back from the hospital, he saw I was still there, he explained to a guy with him, "They look over and see Baker with somebody and they say 'Get the little guy next to him, we'll get him any time.' That's the only reason you survived." [laughs] That might be true, I don't know.

INT: How often did you get a shower or a change of clothes?

HB: Rarely. We would get some clothes changes but a shower was very rare.

INT: How often did you get a hot chow?

HB: Our company kitchen was great. They got up the line on a lot of nights when a lot of other companies didn't get up. They did an excellent job. We got probably as many meals as anybody on the line. They really made an effort to get up every night if they possibly could. Of course, there were certain times they couldn't but on the whole they did a great job for us.

INT: How were you treated by the civilian population? Did you have much contact?

HB: Not in Germany particularly. We were working in pretty well bombed out areas. The Bulge had come through that way and now it was going back so there weren't many civilians for us to contact in Germany. In Holland the civilians were fantastic.

INT: You were in Germany when the war ended?

HB: Yes, from southern France we went back to the Rhine River and our patrols set up cables for a bridge across the Rhine for the final attack into the Ruhr Pocket. We followed across and our job then was to clean out the Ruhr Pocket. It was enclosed and we had some really heavy fighting through there.

INT: A lot of casualties?

HB: Out of 180 men originally, there were two of us that never went off the line. Replacements came and were hit and gone before you knew their names, which was extremely difficult. And of course there were friends that you lost. In our first real combat I lost my two closest friends, one was killed and one was crippled for life.

INT: Where did you meet them?

HB: In the Infantry, in Louisiana. They were in other ASTP units.

INT: When you were on the Rhine, did you meet the Russians?

HB: No. Never had any contact with them.

INT: What about concentration camps? Did you see any of those?

HB: We liberated a labor camp in one area we were in. Of course it was toward the end and they were just working these people and not feeding them. I can't recall the name of the town but we liberated that camp and told them that they had absolute run of the town. The people that were able to went out and sort of got even.

INT: Did you capture any German prisoners?

HB: We took a lot of prisoners and in most cases they were regular army. If you took SS (Schutzstaffel) prisoners then you had to be extremely careful because they were bad – they'd give up their life to take an American life. Most of the prisoners we took, toward the end especially, were older men who had no more desire to be there than we did. We didn't have any problem with them at all.

INT: When the war ended did you do any occupation duty?

HB: Yes, our division was assigned to Camp Brucken which was a redeployment camp, just outside of Reims, France. We ran that camp until our point count came up and we could leave.

INT: How were you point wise?

HB: I had too many to go to the Pacific and not enough to go home. [laughs]

INT: Once the war ended, was there a lot of celebration?

HB: Yes, this other fellow and I, the only two that went all the way, we drew for two furloughs, the company had two furloughs—one to the States and one to England. It was just before the end of the war and luckily I drew the one to England rather than the one to the States. We were coming back from that on VE (Victory in Europe) Day, we were on the Channel coming back to France when that happened so they sent us into Paris for three days extra leave. That was a celebration, that was wild.

INT: I can imagine. I suppose there were a lot of rumors that you guys would end up in Japan, right?

HB: Yes, well the short point guys did. The redeployment camps were sending most of those troops straight into Japan, straight into that theater.

INT: When the war ended with Japan in August of '45, were you still in Europe?

HB: No, I was discharged on New Year's Eve of '45.

INT: When did you head back to the States from Europe?

HB: In the fall of '45. We went to some ack-ack [anti-aircraft] outfit to come home with. We had a bad storm out of LaHavre and we got pushed almost into Spain but we limped into Boston on a Liberty ship.

INT: Did you get sea sick?

HB: I didn't, no, but the crew was even seasick. Another guy and I decided that eating was the solution to sea sickness, of course that's my solution to most everything. [laughs] We limped into Boston and we were in Camp Miles Standish on Christmas Day we landed there. That was a really emotional day, to land on Christmas. I got a phone call into my mother and I'm sure it was one of the best Christmas presents she ever got. We had our choice of going home for a furlough or being discharged and I chose to get out. We went to Fort Dix.

INT: You got discharged, they gave you your mustering out pay, and I assume you got on a train and headed for home?

HB: Yes. On the back of the discharge it says, "At the convenience of the government." [laughs]

INT: What did you do when you first got home?

HB: Immediately I went downtown and joined some old friends. That spring semester I went back to Yale, I still had my scholarship. They asked me use my GI Bill and free up the scholarship which I did, but they continued to give me a job for my room and board. I

graduated in '48 with a degree in Civil Engineering which I never used. I came home and met a young girl who lived with her father who was a widower and ran a grocery store. My mother was a widow and was running a business in Johnstown. We both felt obligated to take care of that. We married and I worked in a bank for a while, then we took over the grocery store and ran it for 37 years. I retired in the spring of 1987.

INT: What have you been doing since you retired?

HB: I've always enjoyed volunteer work. While we had the store we established two group homes for children with problems in their lives. We ran that through the 1970s, we ran it for 30 some years until the state decided the money was better spent somewhere else which was totally ridiculous. Right toward the end of the war, I had four replacements come in, 18-year old kids, and they were amazing, just a very unusual bunch of kids. After working with them and having them in my platoon I felt that the youth of this country was [one word inaudible]. So all the volunteer work I've done since then has been directed toward youth. I had a [one word inaudible] and Samaritan counselling center and a family counselling center and for ten years I was a court-appointed special advocate for foster children. I've gotten involved in the church and worked for young people.

INT: Let me go back to World War II. Did you get to see any USO (United Service Organizations) shows?

HB: The only USO show we saw was on the Rhine River. This group came and set up their coffee thing and all that and we were going through the line getting doughnuts and coffee and one of the people asked, "Just how far away are the Germans?" And the idiot they asked said, "Just across that river." That was the last we saw of our coffee and doughnuts, they packed up and left! That was the closest we got to a USO show. [laughs]

INT: Did you do any flying at all?

HB: No.

INT: You got to spend three days in Paris.

HB: Yes, right at the end of the war.

INT: Was Paris your favorite city over there?

HB: It would have to be. We went back in '79 and I re-ran the route that the division went. I went back to the first day at Grand Halleaux where I lost my two closest friends. We actually saw the buildings they were shot from, they're still there. We retraced that route through there.

INT: When you were discharged did you join any veteran's groups?

HB: I joined the VFW (Veterans of Foreign Wars) but I haven't been active.

INT: Did you go to any division reunions?

HB: No, I kept looking but there were none I could make it to. This one friend of mine that was crippled, our friendship stayed until he died in 2005. We stayed very close, he was in Detroit but we got together often and our families grew up knowing each other. I still correspond with his daughter.

INT: How do you think your time in the service changed or affected your life?

HB: It probably aged me because you grow up fast. [laughs] And the experience of seeing those young kids inspired me to work with children. As I often said the hardest thing for me was to understand why I came home and somebody else didn't. Fortunately I have two children and five grandchildren and I realize now that that's why I was spared. But that was a tough battle for a long time to understand why Larry Brown was killed and I wasn't, that was extremely hard to understand.

INT: I understand you've got some photographs?

HB: My daughter's collected them all. [Shows a head shot.]

INT: Is that you in basic training?

HB: I think that was taken on one the few furloughs I got home. [Shows photo of self in khaki uniform.] This was definitely taken at home, at the same time that was.

[Shows photos of soldiers in snow.] These are just general combat pictures.

INT: We can't have too many pictures. Was that taken during the Bulge?

HB: Yes. [Shows photos taken during the Battle of the Bulge then shows framed "conglomeration" of 75th Division route map, unit patch, and his awards and decorations.]

INT: I see you got a Bronze Star. Did you get that for saving that fellow's life?

HB: No, I got that in France on the day we took our heavy bombardment in helping with the wounded. [Shows newspaper clipping from local paper announcing Bronze Star award then shows uniform jacket.]

INT: Can you still fit in the jacket?

HB: I think I could. This patch is the outfit we came home with.

INT: Your ribbons and your combat infantry badge are in the frame. So they made you a staff sergeant?

HB: Yes, I jumped from PFC (private first class) to staff.

INT: That was pretty good in the Infantry.

HB: Our original platoon sergeant was wounded. When he came back from the hospital he came out to see me right away because I took over the platoon while he was gone as a PFC. He said, "I got you a little boost in pay, from PFC to staff."

INT: The guys you served with were from all over the country?

HB: All over.

INT: Did you have a lot of southerners in the unit?

HB: Quite a few. We didn't have any blacks but at that time, that's the way it was. That was one good thing about ASTP was the mixing of the colors because I think the southern boys who came into ASTP left with a lot of different attitudes towards blacks. Of course they pretty well had to – the black boys were all college graduates, they were smarter, they were all ranked because they'd been in the Army, they were all tech sergeants. This one tech sergeant taught me bridge while I was there, I've been forever grateful to him. [laughs]

INT: So you're a bridge player?

HB: Yes, got a game tonight.

INT: I forgot to ask if you recall where you were and what you were doing when you heard about the death of President Roosevelt.

HB: No I don't.

INT: Going further back, do you remember where you were and what you were doing when you heard about the attack on Pearl Harbor?

HB: I was still home. I think my mother and I had taken a ride up to [Schenectady?] and we heard it on the radio coming back. It was unbelievable.

INT: Did your life change with the rationing and being at war?

HB: My mother spent the war using her meat coupons for her cats. [laughs] Life changed and your attitude toward it.

INT: Everybody was behind the soldier.

HB: That was the big advantage we had. We came home and were greeted with open arms, these poor kids coming out of Afghanistan get a pretty decent greeting now but it seems so brutal, the way they were treated, especially the Iraq veterans.

INT: Is there anything else you'd like to mention in closing?

HB: Ed Snyder, who was crippled, said to me one day, "I don't regret one minute of the time we spent in the service." If he can say that, went through life never being able to

walk on his own, then I don't think I've got a complaint in the world. That was the attitude of that generation, of 20-year old kids who grew up very fast. He kind of summed up the whole thing and I can't complain. To have lived through it gives you a perspective on life.

INT: Thank you so much for your interview.