

*William W. Baker,  
WWII Veteran*

Alex Jones  
2-28-04

## WILLIAM W. BAKER, WORLD WAR II VETERAN

On January 17, 2005, I had the pleasure of interviewing William W. Baker, who served his country during World War II in the South Pacific. His story was inspiring.

### Early Life

William W. Baker was born in 1921 in Kansas City, Missouri. His parents were Grace Mae Baker and William R Baker. Although his parents lived in Kansas, they went to a Missouri hospital for the birth of their only child. Some of his fondest childhood memories were of the days he spent watching his grandmother publish a daily newspaper from her print shop in Rosedale, Kansas. He considered her his hero. Those experiences gave him the early ambition to be a newspaperman himself.

### Education

Mr. Baker attended Rockhurst High School, a private Catholic school, in Kansas City, Missouri, and graduated in 1939. He then went to college at the University of Michigan. Mr. Baker started off studying pre-law, because his dad was a lawyer and wanted him to do the same thing. He decided, however, to switch majors because he did not want to be in school that long, but then fate intervened.

### Enlistment

William Baker was a college junior on December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1941, when Japan attacked the United States in Pearl Harbor. He quickly enlisted in the Army at age nineteen. His dad had to give his permission before Mr. Baker could join. The senior Mr. Baker had done a similar thing when he enlisted in World War I and had to have *his* father's permission to enlist. Mr. Baker was sworn in on December 26, 1941, only five days after his wedding.

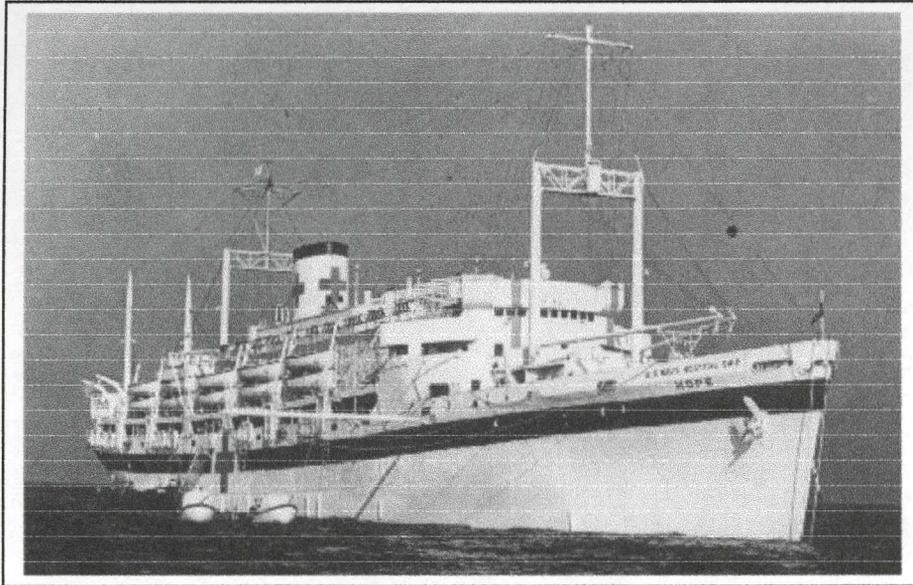
### First Assignments

Mr. Baker's first assignment was at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Because he could type, he was given administrative jobs. He spent a few months traveling the state recruiting and swearing in new army personnel. Mr. Baker could spend weekends at home, and with a new wife he thought that was "peachy keen." Orders soon came through for him, however, to attend basic training at Camp Shelby, Mississippi, and he was assigned to a railway operating battalion. He was given the choice to either become an administrative clerk for the railway, or go to cooking school. Mr. Baker decided he would not make a very good cook, so he became a clerk. His battalion trained on the New Orleans and New England railroads.

Mr. Baker applied for officer training school in North Dakota, but instead got transferred to Fort Benning, Georgia, for a 13-week infantry-training course. At the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> week, the trainees had to navigate their way through a swamp with just a compass. That is where he discovered the night blindness that would keep him from being on the front lines and out of officer training school. He then was assigned to Camp Stoneman in California. He worked in the library, showing training films to soldiers who were about to go overseas. While at Camp Stoneman he established a daily newspaper, a first step toward reaching his childhood dream of being a newspaperman.

### In the Navy

In 1943 Mr. Baker transferred to the Navy Medical Corps. He was posted on the U.S.S. Hope, one of three Red Cross hospital ships in the South Pacific. The other two ships were the U.S.S. Comfort and the U.S.S. Mercy. The Navy ran all the ships, but the Army ran the hospitals on board.



The U.S.S. Hope was a 10,000-ton, 720-bed hospital ship with two surgeons, eighteen

### **The U.S.S. Hope**

doctors, 48 nurses, and 120 corpsmen. It arrived the day after a beach invasion to pick up the wounded soldiers, and provide aid until they could get to a land hospital. Mr. Baker was a Master Sergeant who helped get the wounded soldiers on board the ship.

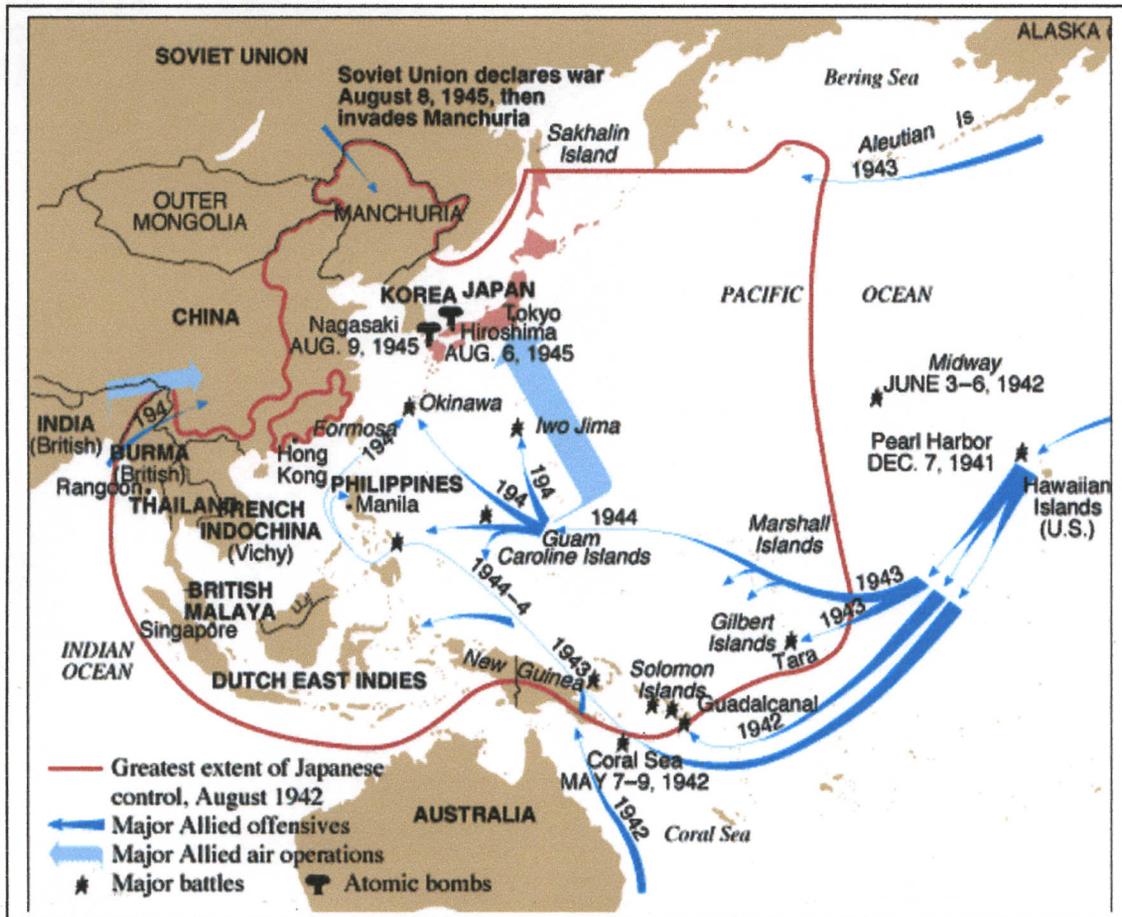
Red Cross ships were painted white with a green stripe and flew the Red Cross flag. They sailed lighted at night, unlike battle or cargo ships, and traveled alone. They were not allowed to carry weapons. They were supposed to be protected from attack by the Geneva Convention agreement, if they followed these rules.

### *Life Aboard the U.S.S. Hope*

The crewmen's main way of communication to loved ones back home was through "V-mail," or Victory mail. The whole concept behind V-mail was to save room aboard cargo ships or planes. The sender would write the letter on a special form that would then be photographed. The reels of film that contained up to 1500 letters were taken back to the United States. There the film would be developed into photographs that would be sent to the recipients.

All letters that were sent from overseas had to be reviewed and censored by an officer. The United States Military did not want to have spies sending back information to their government. They also did not want our enemies to intercept any military information.

### The South Pacific



One humorous example of censorship happened to Mr. Baker. While he was on leave in Hawaii, he wrote a letter to his wife back home. He described the wonderful food that he ate for lunch, which included many pineapple dishes. When an officer reviewed the letter, all mentions of the word “pineapple” were blacked out. This was to

avoid giving away that Mr. Baker was in Hawaii. So by the time Mrs. Baker got the letter, it just sounded like a normal meal that could be found anywhere.

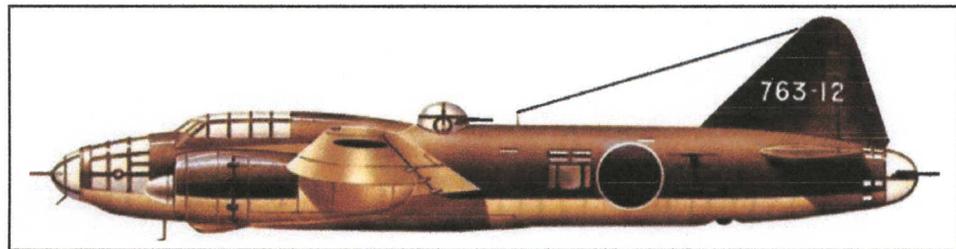
The daily rations for the sailors were mainly from Australia, and included occasional fresh fruit and meat. Following tradition, the Navy served beans and cornbread for breakfast once a week. Mr. Baker remembers all of the food served by the Navy was very starchy.

### Under Attack

Despite the fact that it was a Red Cross ship, the U.S.S. Hope was still attacked at least two times. The first time, the ship was located north of New Guinea. While on deck, Mr. Baker watched in horror as a Japanese Betty Bomber released a torpedo at the U.S.S.

Hope.

Thankfully,  
the crewmen



**The Japanese "Betty Bomber"**

controlling the ship saw the torpedo and turned the ship to avoid being hit. But still to this day, the men on board can remember seeing the bomb whiz by, coming within 50 yards of their ship.

Later, in Okinawa, near the end of the war, the U.S.S. Hope was anchored next to a freighter ship called the "Canada Victory". The Hope was not lighted as usual and as required to be protected. A Kamikaze pilot hit the Canada Victory and sank it immediately.

A third time that the hospital ships were attacked was again in Okinawa. All three of the ships, the Hope, Comfort, and Mercy were loading patients to be brought back to a ground hospital. The Comfort got loaded first and went out from the harbor. Then, about fifteen miles outside Okinawa, another Japanese Kamikaze hit the Comfort in the stack between the two operating rooms, killing 48 people. Fortunately the ship was not sunk and continued on its mission. This incident scared the crew onboard the U.S.S. Hope, because they were to go out next. However, the Hope continued without any problems.

The crews on the hospital ships were never sure whether the Japanese pilots knew they were attacking protected Red Cross ships, or whether they simply never saw the markings on the ships. The bright sunlight reflecting off of the ocean could sometimes make the white ships appear grey, much like cargo ships. Either way, the Geneva Convention protections were not foolproof.

#### *A Christmas to Remember*

On Christmas Eve in 1944, the U.S.S. Hope was north of New Guinea. They started receiving an S.O.S. signal from a Mae West life jacket. During World War II, the soldiers called their inflatable life jackets "Mae Wests," after the actress's famous large bosom. The unique feature about these vests was that when in water, they inflated, and then sent off an S.O.S. signal to be received by rescue ships. The Hope followed the signals for the rest of the day and into the night until about 3 a.m. the next morning. Then the signal was lost.

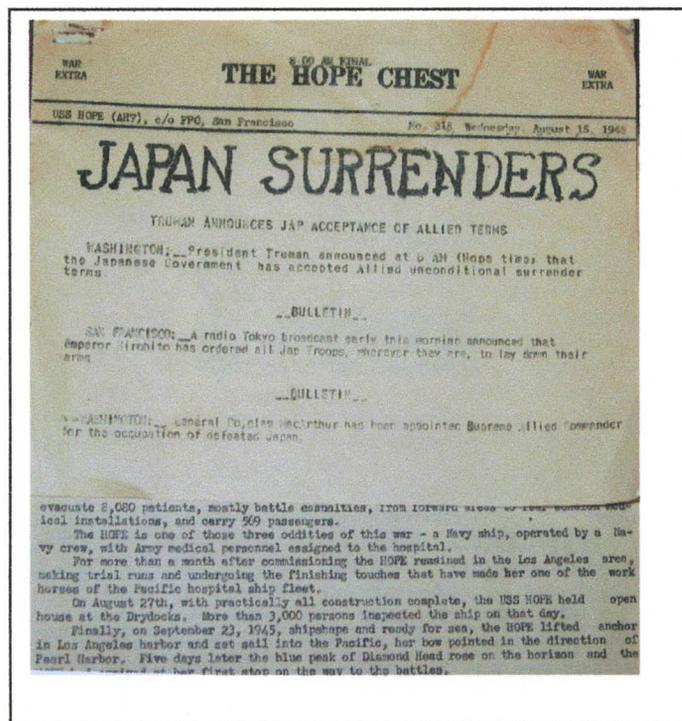
The commander of the Hope decided to stay on course. Finally all of their perseverance paid off. Later that night the crew spotted four aviators floating on a life raft in the distance. They had been floating for over 36 hours. As the Hope approached,

with its lights on, shining red, green, and white, the four aviators thought the ship looked like the best Christmas present ever.

As a hospital ship, the Hope was not allowed to carry passengers. So to get around that rule, the aviators were given pajamas and robes just like all of the other “patients” on board.

### The Hope Chest

Continuing his love for the newspaper business, Mr. Baker established a daily newspaper aboard the U.S.S. Hope. With a staff of three other crewmen, they would gather about three a.m. in the chaplain’s office and listen to the latest news from Armed Forces Radio on a short wave radio. Then they would use that information to write articles and draw cartoons for the “Hope Chest”, which was



published about seven a.m. every morning, seven days a week.

The Hope Chest became very popular among the patients. After being on an island for countless months, the injured soldiers had a hunger to know what was going on in the world. The World Series was of particular interest. It was a very rewarding experience for Mr. Baker. When the press broke down, everyone complained because

they did not get their newspaper on time. Mr. Baker's most memorable time writing for the newspaper was staying up all night waiting for the news that Japan had surrendered.

### Rest and Relaxation

After publishing the Hope Chest in the morning, from three a.m. to seven a.m., Mr. Baker then had to work loading all of the patients onboard. They usually worked loading patients from 7a.m. to midnight. After they unloaded a ship full of patients, they were usually empty for as long as a couple of weeks. Out in the middle of nowhere, there was typically nothing to do but dock on an island somewhere and rest on the beaches. Occasionally, they were fortunate to be able to go to Woendi Island, near Borneo, to have a beer and barbeque picnic.

### Burials at Sea

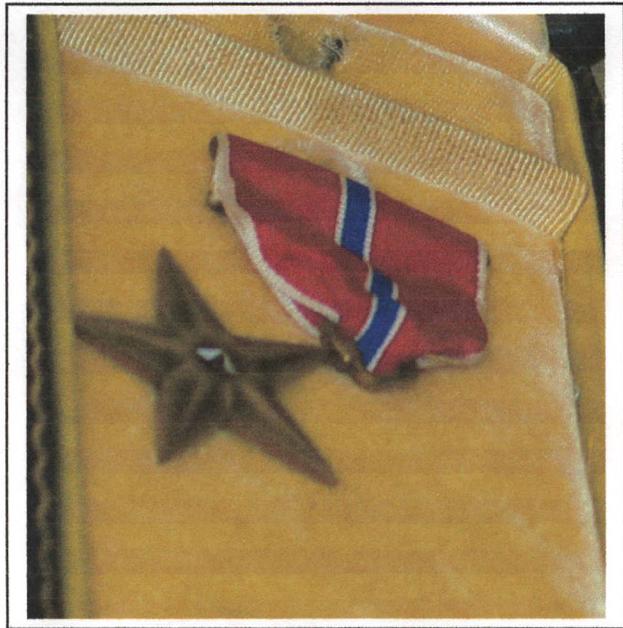
One of Mr. Baker's most vivid memories is the Hope's burials at sea. The Hope had limited capacity and refrigeration for carrying dead bodies, since they needed the space for live patients. This created the need for burial at sea. The Navy had a special tradition for burying their dead at sea. Everything, including the engines, would be turned off so that there would be complete silence for the burial. The only sound was the waves lapping against the bow of the ship. The body is placed in a canvas bag on a board on the side of the ship. The chaplain says a few words, the board is tilted, and the body slips into the ocean. To this day, Mr. Baker can still hear the sound of the silence, and the splash of the body hitting the water.

### Bronze Star

Mr. Baker earned the Bronze Star for organizing the method of loading patients onto the U.S.S. Hope. The Bronze Star is awarded to those who show meritorious service on duty.

### The End of the War

On September 2, 1945, Japan surrendered to the United States, effectively ending World War II. Mr. Baker and his crewmates thought that President Truman's decision to drop the atomic bomb on Japan was the right thing to do, and saved more lives than invading Japan would have done.



It meant that they could go home.

**Mr. Baker's Bronze Star**

The U.S.S. Hope was sent Wakayama, Japan to function as the station hospital. They stayed there for about five months before receiving orders to go home to the United States. Mr. Baker got home to his wife at the base in Torrance, California in November 1945.

### After the War

Upon returning after the end of the war, Mr. Baker and his wife moved in with his mother. He was unable to get the job he wanted at the Kansas City Star newspaper because they were waiting for their former employees to get back from the War. Heeding

his father-in-law's advice, Mr. Baker went back to school at the University of Michigan. The G.I. Bill of Rights paid for this additional education, and a monthly stipend.

In 1947, Mr. Baker graduated from college and successfully got a job at the Kansas City Star. He feels that the experience of making the newspaper on the U.S.S. Hope helped him to be more successful in his chosen career, even more than his education. At the Star, he was a reporter, copy editor, make-up and picture editor, and editorial writer. He was editor of both the Kansas City Times morning newspaper, and the Kansas City Star evening newspaper. As time went on, he got more and more into administration and became the president of the company. He spent thirty-two years at the Kansas City Star. Mr. Baker, also spent ten years, from 1976 to 1986, teaching journalism at the University of Kansas in Lawrence, Kansas.

#### Lasting Impressions

"War is a young man's game," and Mr. Baker remembers the faces of the dying soldiers. He remembers talking to them one second and then having to suddenly call a medic. Mr. Baker still today thinks that his service in the war on the U.S.S. Hope was better than expected. He now has a profound love for the ocean. Mr. Baker likes to go on cruises with his wife when they go on vacation, to be with the ocean. On one of his cruises, the Captain purposely paused the ship over the site where the Titanic sank. The ship's engines were quieted, and a wreath of flowers was thrown into the ocean. This caused Mr. Baker to reflect upon the burials at sea that he experienced.

Mr. Baker still corresponds with some of his old comrades from World War II because they established a lot of camaraderie aboard the ship. Finally, Mr. Baker is very

thankful that he was not down in the combat trenches throughout the whole war, but instead he was on the U.S.S. Hope.

As a World War II Veteran, Mr. Baker has strong feelings towards the Vietnam War and the current Iraq War. While at the Kansas City Star, Mr. Baker took a dim view of the Vietnam War. He did not feel like that that war was like World War II, a just war that had to happen. Mr. Baker feels that the current war in Iraq is a “disastrous mistake.”

William W. Baker served his country well in World War II. He went on to serve his community as a newspaper editor and university professor. I am grateful for and thank him for his service.



William W. Baker  
January 2005