

NOT TO BE FOOLED --- HOW THE ARMY PROTECTED THE INTEGRITY OF THE MEDAL OF HONOR IN THE CASE OF PRIVATE JOHN BAKER

By Michael C. Eberhardt

For Medal of Honor historians, the name “Private John Baker” should mean nothing---and for good reason, despite the written recommendation in 1875 by General William T. Sherman, Commanding General of the Army, that Baker receive the Medal.

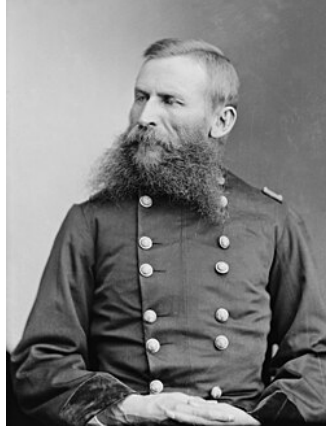
The story of Private John Baker sheds interesting light on the internal Department of Army practices in vetting potential Medal of Honor recipients during the Indian War period when, as historian Dwight Mears points out in his excellent book *The Medal of Honor, The Evolution of America’s Highest Decoration* (University Press of Kansas 2018), there was:

- a different standard for “gallantry”; and
- the absence of structure (as compared to modern times) regarding any formal board to review both the actions and backgrounds of potential Medal of Honor candidates.

The fact that 439 Medals of Honor were awarded in the Indian War period compared to 464 Medals of Honor for WWII speaks for itself in terms of Mears’ conclusion that “the Medal of Honor cannot be viewed as a static decoration The medal has had different qualification thresholds at different times” This contrast is certainly not used to suggest that Medals of Honor awarded during the Indian War period were undeserved compared to WWII. Indeed, in this writer’s opinion, the degree of Medal of Honor recognition in both WWI and WWII was woefully limited, and the Medal was deserved by many more military members in those two conflicts. But the differences pointed out by Mr. Mears do bear on what happened with Private John Baker.

Private John Baker’s “Medal of Honor” story starts in Clear Creek Canyon, Arizona, on January 2, 1873, where soldiers and scouts assigned to Company K of the 5th Cavalry and Company G of the 23rd Infantry, under the command of Lt. William F. Rice, engaged a number of Apaches who had recently been raiding in the area. Several Indians were killed or wounded, and one soldier suffered a serious head wound. The soldier’s name, or so it appeared, was recorded as Private John Baker.

The engagement at Clear Creek Canyon was one of scores of similar engagements between the Apaches and U.S. Army soldiers during 1872-1873. While several individual acts of gallantry were recognized with commendations (including Medals of Honor) during this two-year period, the Army thought it important to gather information about other soldiers whose conduct and gallantry had not otherwise been recognized with specific commendations. Accordingly, in April 1873 General George Crook, serving as Commanding General of the Army’s Department of Arizona, issued Army General Order 14. That several page Order lists the names of 63 soldiers for various acts of gallantry in connection with specifically identified Indian battles; this included some of the better known battles of the period like those at Salt River Canyon and in the Superstition Mountains, as well as lesser battles like those at Tonto Creek and in Clear Creek Canyon.



General Geoge Crook

But General Crook's General Order 14 also included an additional list of 22 soldiers, and ten Apache scouts, who were generally recognized and commended for "good conduct during the different campaigns and engagements." Apparently, these 22 soldiers and ten scouts had distinguished themselves on a consistent basis over this same two-year period of 1872-1873. Interestingly, a handful of soldiers were recognized in General Order 14 in association with a specific battle, as well as being one of the 22 soldiers being generally commended. Private John Baker was one of them. He was recognized for his actions at Clear Creek Canyon, and he also appears on the general commendation list. To his commanders, he must have appeared as a truly outstanding and deserving soldier.

Between April 1873 (when General Order 14 was issued) and early 1875, the Army scrutinized General Crook's extensive list of soldiers and scouts in an apparent effort to identify deserving Medal of Honor candidates to recommend to General Sherman, who was the final authority regarding Medal recipients. As a result of this process, in a February 22, 1875, letter from the Commanding General, Department of Arizona to the Army Adjutant General, Brigadier General Edward D. Townsend, the General Crook list was whittled down to 36 names to be recommended for the Medal of Honor. The list was comprised of 26 soldiers (including Private John Baker) and the ten Indian scouts.

Thereafter, on March 30, 1875, the Army Adjutant General's Office issued a directive to the Chief Clerk of the War Department, based on the order of General Sherman, authorizing the engraving of 34 Medals of Honor. Between the February 22, 1875 letter with its 36 names and the March 30, 1875 directive to the Chief Clerk, two names were struck from the 36--- they were Corporal Thomas Hanlon who deserted on September 10, 1873 and Pvt. Albert Bross who deserted on February 4, 1874. As a result, as initially issued, the March 30, 1875, order directed the Chief Clerk to engrave 34 Medals, including one for Private Baker.

But fortunately, before actual execution of the engraving order for the final list of 34 Medal of Honor recipients, good old Army attention to detail prevailed. It was discovered that Private John Baker was a fraud in name---albeit perhaps not in his accomplishments. As a result, Baker's name was lined through on the Adjutant General's order to the Chief Clerk, and the order was annotated in handwriting to show that the total number of authorized Medals was "33", and not "34" as originally written.

While the exact details of the how the determination was made to strike Private John Baker's name from the final list of 34 may not be clear some 145 years later, the Army enlistment records of Charles Hoover do reveal why it was necessary to do so.

Charles Hoover enlisted in Atlanta, Georgia on February 16, 1869. He was born in Lexington, Kentucky in 1846. However, Hoover was not long for the Army, and he deserted three months later on May 19, 1869. Three years later, using the name John Baker, Hoover apparently decided to give the Army another "go" and enlisted on May 13, 1872, and entered service anew as part of Company K, 5th Cavalry. (When Hoover first enlisted under his true name in 1869, he also served in the 5th Cavalry but in a Company different than Company K. But Hoover only served for three months before his initial desertion in 1869, so he was not likely a familiar face when he enlisted again three years later as Baker.)

Seven months after Hoover's re-enlistment as Baker, he was wounded in the head in the Clear Creek Canyon battle. But, now serving as Private John Baker, he deserted again on November 9, 1873. He was apprehended two days later on November 11, and it was then that he was discovered actually to be Charles Hoover. Hoover was discharged as a private on August 24, 1874.

However, the review of General Crook's list and General Sherman's subsequent final order continued after Hoover's discharge---both documents still including Baker's name. What appears likely to have happened is that the Chief Clerk, following receipt of the March 30, 1875, list for 34 engraving orders, sought to determine the geographic whereabouts or addresses of the recipients in order to ensure delivery of the Medals to correct locations. There are in fact location entries in the records for the other proposed recipients. In the case of Private John Baker, the Clerk likely started his search for a Baker location by reviewing existing records including Army enlistment records, which by that time in 1875 would have revealed (which they in fact did) the fraudulent use of Baker's name, the documented desertions, and his discharge some seven months earlier in August 1874 under his true name, Charles Hoover.

Baker's name as a presumed deserving candidate had been perpetuated through various reviews starting in April 1873 when General Crook assembled his large list of potential candidates. The Baker fraud was not detected then because he had not yet deserted at the point when General Crook's list was initially assembled ---that desertion occurring in November 1873, some seven months after General Crook's list was published. And while the Baker (Hoover) fraud was not uncovered prior to the engraving order issuance on March 30, 1875 (even though the names of two other deserters were struck), the fraud was detected before the Medals of Honor were awarded to the other recipients some two weeks later on April 12, 1875.

While there was a proliferation of Medals of Honor issued during the Indian Wars (with some documented errors in processing such Medals), the Army in the case of Baker was able preserve the integrity of the award process by canceling the issuance to Baker even after General Sherman's orders --- admittedly almost on the eve of the award to him..

The Army action may have been belated, but the correct action was taken in the end.

In sum, perhaps Baker (Hoover) was a soldier whose conduct at least on one occasion in Clear Creek Canyon in January 1873 may indeed have warranted Medal of Honor consideration, but the discovery of his deception is a credit to the diligence of the Army in a time when vetting practices were far more difficult than today.