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Decorated Lafayette WWII Veteran Lives Life to the Fullest

By Lou Fancher



Dan Baker with a model of the Curtiss SB-2C Helldiver aircraft. Photo A. Scheck

Dan Baker is a man of action. Ask the 94-year-old former World War II Navy fighter pilot and still-actively practicing attorney about his late wife, Arlene, who passed away in 2012, he springs out of a chair in his Lafayette home's sunroom and races down a hallway.

Returning with a black-and-white photo of his wife of 64 years, he spouts poetic and practical reasons for marrying her within three months of their first meeting. "She was charming, inside and outside. Look at her: she was beauty itself," and "She was working and making money: I wasn't," he says.

Then, like the Grumman F6F Hellcat he flew long ago in combat, a subsequent inquiry about WWII battles sends him running again.

Returning, he brings medals, mounted in a display box: a Navy Cross, for bombing the Japanese battleship Nagato; the Distinguished Flying Cross, for destroying a second enemy ship; an Air Medal, for shooting down a Japanese fighter plane.

Baker grew up in San Francisco and says he was "a party boy," a kid who started as an honor student and "went downhill" just gradually enough to still graduate from college. A heart murmur kept him out of the Army, but when the country started to re-examine even legitimate outliers like Baker, he joined the Navy on May 10, 1942. "Nobody had

a choice," he says. "Everybody had the idea they wanted to go because there was a war going on."

After training on a two-winged Sterman airplane at Navy Preliminary Flight School in Livermore, Baker was sent to Florida. Trained on combat planes, he became an instructor and scouted the Atlantic coast, looking for German submarines. After 10 months, he was assigned to Air Group 18 and found himself on the 900-foot-long U.S.S. Intrepid, an aircraft carrier that is now the Intrepid Sea, Air and Space Museum located at Pier 86 on the west side of Manhattan.

But in October of 1944, the Intrepid was a launch pad for the Battle of Leyte Gulf, arguably the largest battle in naval history. "We took down the two largest battleships ever built in Japan, the Yamato and Musashi," Baker says. Japan used all the steel the country produced to build and arm the two signature battleships, distinguished by their size and then-record-setting 18.1 inch guns. "Our group was responsible for sinking the Musashi," Baker says.

Although unafraid to assert the importance of the U.S. military victories, Baker isn't sentimental about his role. "I was trained to do one thing: fly a plane with guns and bombs and go after the targets," he says. "They gave you an award for what you did. When I returned, they thought I was a hero. I thought I'd accomplished the things I was trained to do, and did it successfully."

After the seven-and-a-half years in the Navy, Baker chose to study law at University of California's Hasting College of the Law, when an inexplicable instinct told him there'd be a need for attorneys following the war. Practicing all manner of law as a sole practitioner in Oakland, he then

formed a partnership with another attorney in San Francisco. Hendler, Baker, Green and Taylor grew to be an eight-partner operation and after 30 years, merged with Hanson Bridgett, now a 150-member firm. "I worked and had a job to do," Baker says, about a profession that has awarded him honors not unlike his Navy career.

Distinguished Service, Lifetime Achievement and other awards from international lawyers associations remain tucked away - perhaps because when touring the grounds around his home, which he built in 1973 - duplicating a model house he visited, but rearranging some of the rooms - there were memories of dinner parties, too numerous to individualize. And he has a long list of hobbies: golf, ballroom dancing and reading voraciously.

And there are more achievements: like a California Public Utilities Commission rate program he proposed that he says "controlled the rates (citizens) paid for general commodities, like food and clothing," from 1996 to 2000. A national grassroots campaign he instigated generated enough momentum to cause the Senate and House of Representatives in Washington, D.C., to reverse a ruling he disliked: "I've always been competitive," he says, shrugging, but leaning forward in his chair as if prepared to engage in debate.

Baker's energy would be alarming, if its intensity wasn't disarmed by his still charismatic grin - and the soft, honey-sweet shift in his tone and physicality when he talks about his family and life in Lafayette. He says the city is filling up with buildings and cars, which makes him regretful as a resident, but he speculates, is good for businesses. He calls the area's schools "outstanding," and his two adult children, Danny and Kim, are "loved by everyone who knows them, just like their mother was."

Hopeful that politicians in Washington will find a way to run the country with more harmony and less gridlock, Baker says, "You can't solve everything. You do what you can within the purview of what's available." Has Baker been lucky, to have survived war, prospered through economic cycles of boom and bust, and lived within the fold of a loving family and wonderful friends? "You bet," he says. "Dan Baker has led an interesting life: I did what I wanted to do. I am indeed, lucky."

Distinguished Flying Cross Winner from Battle of Midway to be Honored June 7

Lt. Col. Lloyd Childers (USMC-Ret), a survivor of Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor Dec. 7, 1941, will join fellow members of the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps in commemorating the 72nd Anniversary of the Battle of Midway at the Marines' Memorial Club in San Francisco June 7. Childers, who is also the final surviving member of the torpedo bomber squadrons which spearheaded America's attack against the Japanese Imperial Navy during the tide-turning confrontation at Midway, was awarded both the Distinguished Flying Cross and Purple Heart for "extraordinary achievement in aerial flight." L. Snyder

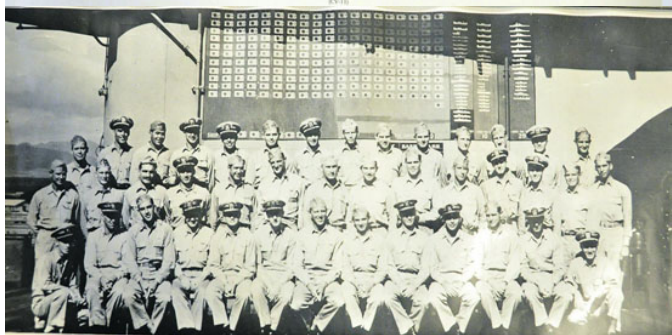
Lamorinda Weekly will feature a profile of Childers in its July 2 issue.



DANIEL W. BAKER
Ensign, USNR
San Francisco, Calif.



U.S.S. INTREPID



The U.S.S. Intrepid crew in front of the victory board, which tracked the number of enemy aircraft and ships destroyed. Image provided



Dan Baker's Distinguished Flying Cross and other service crosses.

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