

Stories of the World War I Experiences of Samuel Alvin Baker

Three of the Baker brothers served in World War I, Ira Lee Baker and John Wesley Baker in the Army, and my great-uncle Samuel Alvin Baker in the Navy. He enlisted in the Navy at the Naval Recruiting Station in St. Louis, Missouri, on 7/13/1918, and was sent to the Naval Training Station at Great Lakes, Illinois on 7/16/1918. He was assigned to the Naval Air Station in Brunswick, Georgia, on 10/15/1918. He served on the USS Rijndam, on which he crossed the “big pond” as he put it, and was placed on inactive duty May 2, 1919. The following are stories he told about his “Great War” experiences.

During the winter of 1918, before he went aboard ship, he contracted the “Spanish Flu” as did so many service men. He described being housed in unheated barracks, and it being very cold. When you went to sleep at night, you could look to your left and right at your bunk-mates, and be pretty sure that at least one of the three of you would be dead before morning. He said he would cough so much at night that when he woke up in the morning his pillow case would be slick with mucus and blood, and he would turn it inside out to try to find a dry spot to rest his head on. When he looked outside the window, the bodies of his fellow sailors were piled up like “cord wood” waiting for burial. He developed a love of lemon drop candy following being given one by a Salvation Army volunteer who visited the barracks. He said it was the first thing that had tasted good to him in so long that he remarked on it and the visitor left him the whole bag. The fact that he could finally enjoy the taste of something made him believe that he might eventually survive the flu, and for the rest of his life he would seldom walk by a Salvation Army kettle without making a contribution.

The USS Rijndam was a confiscated Dutch passenger liner commandeered as troop ship. The Rinjdam made multiple trips to Brest and Saint Nazaire, France, carrying war munitions and troops. They did not have shipboard sonar or radar and relied on lookouts in the crow’s nest to spot other ships, torpedoes, or U boats. When on lookout duty, you were locked into the crow’s nest by the man you relieved, and were released by the man relieving you. Most watches were four hours long, but if the man relieving you could not climb the ships ladder, you remained on watch until relieved. He said that during bad weather, he felt he could reach out of the window and touch the water on the port side of the ship, and then when the ship would role, you would swear you could use the other hand to touch the sea on the starboard side. It was a cold, wet and miserable duty.

The ship had boxing matches for entertainment, and Sam was chosen to “join” the boxing competitions after an impromptu demonstration of his ability following someone trying to steal his piece of lemon pie. There was a professional boxer also aboard the Rijndam named Tommy Kilbane, who Sam managed to knock out after one bout. After regaining consciousness, Kilbane supposedly looked at this southeast Missouri farm boy and uttered “who’d have thunk it!” Sam always attributed his knock out to an extremely lucky punch.

When the ship arrived in France, all the sailors were eager to get leave and taste the “delights” France had to offer. Sam was on third watch, and was somewhat resentful that he would have to wait for the first and second watches to return from their leave before he could leave the ship. However, after first watch returned, the sounds of severe suffering could be heard coming from the “head” as these returnees had occasion to use the bathroom. Sam asked a medic friend what was going on, and was told these men were experiencing the first signs of a case of gonorrhea. The medic then demonstrated the tool used to treat this, a slender metal cylinder with four sharp blades that emerged when the base was twisted. When told this was inserted and used to drain the infection, Sam said he suddenly lost interest in leaving the ship.

While in France, Sam said the sailors would drop coins in the water, or throw a handful on the pier, for the French children to retrieve. He recalled that the wooden shoes they wore, called sabots, made a sound as they ran down the pier “just like horseshoes on a wooden bridge”. The kids would run and dive into the water, or into a pile of other kids, to get the coins, and they were always begging for “American cigarettes”. Sam always loved watching and interacting with children, although his only daughter, Burma Baker, lived just five days and he and his wife, Ruby, lost at least one other child early in a pregnancy.

Sam was related to me as the wife of my grandmother’s sister in genealogical terms, but in affection he and his wife, Edith, took the place of the grandparents who died before I was born. or so early in life I can’t remember them. Sam was a complex person, and not by any means perfect, but I loved him dearly and I am proud to say that I knew and respected him.

Lisa Wells Santi, 4-20-2017, from personal recollections of myself and my brother, Mitchel Kent Wells.

Genealogical information sources: personal narrative, Ancestry.com, and FindaGrave.com

Military information sources: Missouri Digital History and The American Heritage History of World War I, copyright 1964