$10 ‘payback’ yields many happy returns

The “occupation” space on Hal Barker’s income-tax form usually says something like “carpenter/historian,” a double feature that ought to give even the IRS pause. But it’s his investments that have been turning out rather well. His original $10 recently became $1,031,000, tax-free.

People with veterans in the family know that the soldiers who actually win medals or battlefield decorations are more loath to talk about them than those who can go on for decades about the medals they almost won, or should have won. Barker’s father, Edward, was an Army lieutenant colonel, a combat helicopter pilot, retired now and living in Crockett, down on the fringes of the Sam Houston National Forest. His son, Hal, was 3 when Barker took part in the battle of Heartbreak Ridge in Korea in 1951. It was 28 years later, 1979, before Hal Barker learned his Dad had been awarded the Silver Star from that engagement. He was curious about the details. He knew only that it involved the attempted rescue of a downed Marine fighter pilot.

The battle of Heartbreak Ridge is not to be confused with the recent Clint Eastwood film of the same name, in which Eastwood as a Marine topkick leads the lads into the invasion of Grenada. The North Koreans and Red Chinese were a mite tougher than the Cuban construction workers defending Grenada.

In 1979 Barker wrote the Marine Corps to find out how his father won the decoration. They wrote back that he should check with the Army, whose 23rd Infantry Regiment was the main unit engaged in the 30-day battle.

That correspondence led to his being invited to the annual reunion of the 23rd at Fort Washington, N.Y., in 1982.

“A small group of the survivors of Heartbreak Ridge let me sit with them at a long table to discuss the agonies that were still fresh in their minds, almost 30 years later. After awhile I asked if they remembered a helicopter rescue that had come late in the battle. A Marine Corsair pilot had ...en hit by friendly fire, and had parachuted into enemy territory just north of the regiment’s positions.

Testimonials

“Everyone started talking at once. One veteran said he could remember the sound of bullets striking the chopper. Another talked about the artillery shells exploding. A third guy said the rescue chopper pilot must have been insane. They recalled the chopper would disappear behind a ridgeline, only to reappear again and again. Another man remembered the sound of the thuds and clunks of the small-arms fire hitting the helicopter. Another could see the pieces of the chopper coming off. Finally, after almost an hour, it reappeared flying at full speed, 60 knots in those days, and rushed close over the ridge. A cheer went up all along the line.

“I told them that loony chopper pilot was my father. The vets didn’t say anything for a while. The rescue was unsuccessful. The young Marine pilot died in captivity.”

The following year, the regiment had its reunion in Dallas. Bill Mellon of Dallas was the association’s president.

“He helped get me appointed as the first civilian honorary life member of the regiment association,” Hal Barker said this week. “I discovered there was no national memorial to Korean veterans, even though 54,828 died there and 8,177 are missing.”

Doing it his way

With that $10, Barker established the Korean War Memorial Trust in December of 1984. That’s the sawbuck that’s swelled to $1,031,000.

“Last October 28, President Reagan signed a bill to authorize a five-million-dollar Korean War Memorial in Washington, D.C. He specifically named our trust fund as sole recipient of the donations. All of the money received will go for design and construction. The fund is set up so that no money would be spent on administrative or fund-raising costs.”

“The men of Heartbreak Ridge took the time to tell me about their war. I took the opportunity to thank them in my own way, to prove that at least one person cared. I also see it as a personal payback. I was 4-F for Vietnam.”