

For Gallantry Above and Beyond the Call of Duty

March 25 was National Medal of Honor Day, established by Congress in 1990 “to foster public appreciation and recognition of Medal of Honor recipients.” The Medal of Honor is awarded by the President in the name of Congress, which is why it is often referred to as the *Congressional* Medal of Honor. Since it was first presented in 1863, the medal has been awarded 3,512 times to 3,493 recipients. According to the Congressional Medal of Honor Society (<https://www.cmohs.org>), 19 individuals have been double recipients of the award, and there are 65 living recipients. While we typically think of the Medal of Honor as a national honor that covers all services, there actually is a Medal of Honor for each service.

The Medal of Honor dates back to December 21, 1861, when President Lincoln signed legislation creating the *Navy Medal of Honor*. During the first year of the war a proposal for a battlefield decoration for valor had been submitted to Lt. General Winfield Scott, the Commanding General of the United States Army. Scott, however, was strictly against medals being awarded, which was the European tradition at the time. After he retired in October 1861, Secretary of the Navy Gideon Wells adopted the idea of a decoration to recognize and honor distinguished naval service. On December 9, 1861, James W. Grimes, Republican Senator from Iowa and Chairman of the Committee on Naval Affairs submitted a Bill to “promote the efficiency of the Navy” through the creation of “medals of honor” that would be presented to enlisted seamen and Marines who “distinguish themselves by gallantry in action and other seamanlike qualities” during the Civil War. Congress approved the bill, and President Lincoln signed the legislation into law on December 21, 1861.



*Navy Medal of Honor
Civil War*

The following February, Henry Wilson, Republican Senator from Massachusetts and Chairman of the Senate Committee on Military Affairs and the Militia, introduced a Resolution, "to provide for the Presentation of 'Medals of Honor' to the Enlisted Men of the Army and Volunteer Forces who have distinguished, or may distinguish, themselves in Battle during the present Rebellion." By this time, 88 soldiers had already performed actions for which they eventually received the Medal of Honor. During the Civil War, there was no time limit between the action and award, so many recipients gained Medals of Honor in the years after the war ended. On March 3, 1863, Congress made the Medal of Honor a permanent decoration. The Army extended eligibility for the Medal of Honor to officers as well as enlisted personnel. The Navy medal remained available only for enlisted personnel until 1915.

The first Army recipients received the award on March 25, 1863, from Secretary of War Edwin Stanton. They were six members of “Andrews Raiders” honored for volunteering and participating in the Great Locomotive Chase that took place in northern Georgia on April 12, 1862—almost exactly one year into the war. (That, by the way, makes this year the Medal of Honor’s 160th anniversary, or its *sexadecaCentennial*, which sounds way cooler than *sesquicentennial*.)

The first *action* to earn the Army Medal of Honor had been performed by Asst. Surgeon Bernard John Dowling Irwin, 7th US Infantry, who voluntarily led troops on February 13, 1861—almost two months



*Army Medal of Honor
Civil War*

before the official start of the Civil War—for a 100-mile rescue of some 61 soldiers besieged in Apache Pass, Arizona. However, he was not presented his medal until January 24, 1894—over 30 years later. Robert Williams, Signal Quartermaster of the USS Benton, was the first member of the Navy to be presented the Medal of Honor for his December 1862 actions during the Yazoo River Expedition in Mississippi, part of Grant’s Vicksburg Campaign.

Brevet Major Thomas W. Custer (younger brother of George Armstrong Custer) was the first soldier to be awarded two Medals of Honor. While serving with the 6th Michigan Cavalry, Army of the Potomac, Custer captured a Confederate regimental flag at Tabernacle Church on April 3, 1865, and two more regimental flags at Saylor's Creek on April 6, 1865.

There were no “tangible” benefits received at first in connection with the awarding of the Medal of Honor. Pension rolls for Medal of Honor recipients were first created in 1916, with pensioners receiving \$10 per month from

the federal government. This amount has increased over the years. Without cost-of-living adjustments, the current monthly base rate that pensioners receive is \$1,489.73. This is one of eight special benefits Medal of Honor recipients receive in connection with this award.

On May 22, 1863, 96 men performed actions for which they received the Medal of Honor at Vicksburg, Mississippi. In all, at Vicksburg 120 Medals of Honor were awarded. The most medals awarded in a single day, however, are attributed to June 30, 1863, to 864 members of the 27th Maine Infantry.



*Thomas Custer
Twice Awarded the MOH*

Twenty-five Medals of Honor were awarded to African-American soldiers, the first being Sergeant William H. Carney of Company C, 54th Massachusetts Infantry for action at Fort Wagner, South Carolina on July 1863. When the Company color sergeant was shot down, Carney grasped the flag, led the way to the parapet, and planted the colors thereon. When the troops fell back, he brought off the flag under a fierce fire in which he was twice severely wounded. He was presented the medal on May 23, 1900. (He is not portrayed by name in the 1989 film “Glory;” he is portrayed by Morgan Freeman as the fictitious Sergeant Major John Rawlins.)

On September 29, 1864, Union forces attacked Confederate defenses around Richmond in the Battle of Chaffin's Farm. In spite of swampy land, felled trees, and fortifications, the men—mainly the 4th and 6th Regiments, U.S. Colored Troops (USCT)—charged ahead into withering fire. They held their position until reinforcements arrived. Thirty men proved their valor that day and were awarded the Medal of Honor; thirteen of them were USCT soldiers.

The Medal of Honor was awarded to Dr. Mary Edwards Walker, who remains the only female recipient. A civilian contract surgeon, she was awarded the Medal of Honor for her services in the period 1861-1864 during which she devoted "herself with much patriotic zeal to the sick and wounded soldiers, both in the field and hospitals, to the detriment of her own health, and has also endured hardships as a prisoner of war four months in a Southern prison while acting as contract surgeon." She was presented the Medal of Honor on November 11, 1865.

The most recent Civil War-related Medal of Honor was awarded on November 6, 2014, to Lieutenant Alonzo H. Cushing, Battery A, 4th US Artillery, killed at Gettysburg while helping to repel Pickett's Charge on July 3, 1863.

In all, the government presented 1,523 Medals of Honor to recipients who served during the Civil War, more than any other period in history. (The number does not include medals awarded to the 27th Maine Infantry that were subsequently rescinded.) Of the 1,523 Medals of Honor, 1,198 were to soldiers and 324 were to sailors or marines. These awards represented some 40% of Medals of Honor, considered by many to have been excessive. There were "only" 472 recipients for actions in WWII.



*Dr. Mary Walker,
wearing her Medal of Honor*

Requirements and standards for the Medal of Honor evolved over time. Regulations now include a time limit, restrictions on self-nomination, and requirements for eyewitness statements and official reports. By World War I, it had become clear that the Medal of Honor of the early twentieth century was different from the Medal of Honor of the Civil War and raised concerns that it may have been awarded in cases where it was not warranted. Congress, in response, ordered the Army to create a board of five retired generals to review all of the Army Medals of Honor awarded since the Civil War. The Review Board began work in June 1916 and would take eight months to finish.

Of the 2,625 Army Medals of Honor reviewed, the Board chose to rescind 911 of them. Most of those were from two large groups: the 27th Maine Infantry and President Abraham Lincoln's funeral guards.

The 27th Maine Infantry had been stationed in Washington, D.C., as the Confederates advanced nearby in 1863. The regiment's enlistments were just coming to an end. The men were offered a Medal of Honor to stay and defend the Union's capital. About 300 out of 800 soldiers agreed to remain. However,

no one kept good records of which soldiers stayed and which went home. As a result, Medals of Honor were issued in the name of all the soldiers. Due to the confusion, the 1916 Review Board determined that the basis for the awards were suspect and rescinded all 864 awards.

The second large group of Medals revoked were ones that went to the members of President Lincoln's funeral guard. This group of 29 soldiers ceremoniously protected the president's remains as they toured the country. The Review Board decided that those medals were not awarded for valor and therefore were erroneously bestowed.

Additional Medal of Honor awards were rescinded when the action was determined to not have been valorous even by the original standards. For example, one had been sent to the grieving father of a soldier who had died in the Civil War. Another had gone to a soldier for putting out fuses. The most notable example was Dr. Mary Walker, for whom the board noted "there is no evidence of distinguished gallantry." She refused to return her medal, though.

The board also reluctantly revoked the awards to five civilians. All five were civilian scouts for the Army, included William "Buffalo Bill" Cody, but federal law required that the medal could only go to enlisted men or officers *in the military*. The Review Board wrote that these five had "rendered distinguished service in action and fully earned their medals," so the board had "hope that a modification of the law will permit them to retain the medals."

Decades later, six of the Medals of Honor rescinded by the 1916-1917 Review Board were indeed reinstated: Dr. Walker in 1977 and the five civilians in 1989.



Confederate Medal of Honor

There was a Confederate counterpart—the *Confederate Medal of Honor*. It was first authorized by the First Confederate Congress on October 13, 1862, for soldiers who demonstrated great bravery in combat. However, none were ever created or awarded. In their place, the Confederate Army created the Confederate Roll of Honor in 1863. (Interestingly, similar to Scott, General Robert E. Lee refused to award individual citations for valor, mentioning noteworthy performance in his dispatches instead.)

On July 1, 1896, General Stephen Dill Lee, one of the few remaining senior officers of the Confederate army, spoke to a group of sons of Confederate veterans who had gathered at Richmond to form a group to preserve the memory and valor of the Confederate soldier. He told the group it was their duty to present the true history of the South to future generations.

In 1968 the Sons of Confederate Volunteers, as they became known, passed a resolution to issue the Confederate Medal of Honor "...because there were some incredible acts of valor that had received little

or no recognition during and after the war." In 1977, Private Samuel Davis of Coleman's Scouts became the first to be posthumously presented the Confederate Medal of Honor. As of 2014, at least 50 medals had been awarded. Included in this group are the eight crew members of the Confederate submarine H.L. Hunley who perished in 1864 while attacking the federal war sloop USS Housatonic near Charleston, S.C. Also included is Captain Henry Wirz, former Commandant, Camp Sumter, Georgia, an infamous Confederate military prison. He was convicted of war crimes by a US military commission and executed by hanging in November 1865. (For more information, see Gregg S. Clemmer's Valor in Gray: The Recipients of the Confederate Medal of Honor; Hearthside Publishing, Afton, Virginia; 1997.)