

CHAPTER ONE

SOUTH CAROLINA HEROES

By Walter Edgar, Ph.D.

With the issuance of this website, we pay tribute to South Carolina's Medal of Honor recipients. Since the award was created by the United States Congress in 1862, thirty native sons of the Palmetto State have been cited for bravery above and beyond the call of duty. The Medal of Honor has been awarded for 142 years; however, South Carolina's rich military tradition has existed for more than twice that long—334 years.

I believe that it is appropriate to take a brief glance backward, to the years before there was a Medal of Honor (and before South Carolinians were eligible, since the Medal was created to honor Union valor during the Civil War). The South Carolinians who have been awarded the Medal since 1890 are the latest in a long line of men who were willing to brave all for their fellow soldiers and for the land they called home.

Founded on the southern frontier of the British Empire in North America, South Carolina faced threats from the rival empires of France and Spain as well as Native American nations. In the span of fifteen years in the early eighteenth century, South Carolina's citizen-soldiers twice mounted successful invasions of Spanish Florida, repelled a joint Franco-Spanish invasion, sent two expeditions to rescue North Carolina from the Tuscarora, defeated the mightiest Indian alliance any colony in North America faced, and eliminated pirates from the coast. What they accomplished with no assistance from the Mother Country was little short of amazing. But with skill, intrepidity, and bravery they triumphed over incredible odds and made possible the development of what would become the richest colony in British North America. Among the men who dared the odds and triumphed were James Moore, John Barnwell, and William Rhett.

The American Revolution in South Carolina was a bloody, vicious conflict—one in which neither side granted quarter. We will never have a full count of the Carolinians who gave their lives in the struggle to win our nation's freedom. What we do know, however, is the official listing of those killed and wounded in the Revolution, and these statistics will provide an idea of the nature of the conflict here. In 1780 two-thirds of the one thousand American men in uniform killed in action and 90 percent of all Americans wounded in action fell in South Carolina. Of the total casualties suffered by the patriot cause during the entire war, 18 percent of all individuals killed and 31 percent of all soldiers wounded were casualties of the fighting in South Carolina in 1780 and 1781. It is not surprising that a postwar visitor to the state would note: "In

District No. 96 alone there are twelve hundred widows.”

The list of South Carolina's heroes of the Revolution is a long one, and the choice of individuals is a personal matter. However, on anyone's list would be Francis Marion, Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, William Jasper, Andrew Jackson, William Moultrie, Richard Winn, and William Hill.

In the new nation's conflicts, South Carolinians served in the War of 1812 and in the Seminole War. During the Mexican War the Palmetto Regiment stormed the heights of Chapultepec at Mexico City, paving the way for the capture of the enemy's capital. The regiment's death rate (42 percent) was three times that of the Army as a whole, and Pierce Butler, Adley Hogan Gladden, and Whitfield Brooks are just three of many who could be cited for their valor.

The American Civil War, the conflict that gave birth to the Medal of Honor, began here in South Carolina. In that war virtually the entire eligible male population shouldered arms for the cause in which they believed. Of the sixty thousand men in gray uniforms, the death figures tally somewhere between eighteen thousand and twenty-one thousand. That means that of all eligible males eighteen to forty-five years old, between 31 and 35 percent died in that war. In contrast, the death statistics of the “lost generation” of the European nations in World War I were between 15 and 17 percent.

Of the twenty-six units in the Confederate armies that suffered a 50 percent or greater casualty rate in a single battle, six were from South Carolina: the Seventeenth and Twenty-third South Carolina at Manassas, First South Carolina Rifles at Gaines' Mill, First and Twelfth South Carolina at Second Manassas, and the Seventh South Carolina at Sharpsburg. Only 10 of the 125 men of the Georgetown Rifle Guards returned unscathed. In Maxcy Gregg's Brigade 1,279 were killed and 3,735 were wounded. As in the Revolution, there is a long list of men whose performance of duty was heroic. Among them are Wade Hampton, Ellison Capers, Richard Kirkland, James Longstreet, and Barnard Elliott Bee.

It was not until 1890 that a South Carolinian was awarded the nation's highest military decoration. At the Battle of Wounded Knee, South Dakota, in an engagement with the Sioux Indians, Lieutenant Ernest A. Garlington was severely wounded, but his “distinguished gallantry” led to his receiving the Medal of Honor. In 1909, in action against the Moros in the Philippines, Lieutenant John T. Kennedy was severely wounded as he led his men into a cave occupied by a desperate enemy. Also in 1909, in Chile, Shipfitter First Class George Huber Wheeler was cited for “bravery and extraordinary heroism during a conflagration.” In 1914 at Vera Cruz, in action against Mexican forces, Naval Surgeon Middleton Stuart Elliott without regard for his own safety saw to the safe removal of wounded from the firing line; and Commander William A. Moffett maneuvered his ship into the harbor under cover of darkness and “placed her nearest the enemy and did most of the firing and received most of the

hits.”

During World War I eight servicemen from our state received the nation’s highest decoration. Corporal Freddy Stowers, a member of the 371st Infantry Regiment, died while leading the men of his squad in the successful capture of Hill 188 in the Champagne-Marne Sector. Ensign Daniel A. J. Sullivan, an officer of the USS *Cristobel*, saved “the ship from disaster” by throwing himself on loose depth charges set to explode.

Six servicemen were from the 188th Infantry, the unit with the greatest number of Medals in the American Expeditionary Forces. Three recipients—First Lieutenant James C. Dozier, Sergeant Gary Evans Foster, and Sergeant Thomas Lee Hall—received the Medal for action on 8 October 1918. Dozier and Hall were members of the same company, Company G. Lieutenant Dozier, though painfully wounded, destroyed a machine-gun nest, killed its crew, and captured Germans hiding in a nearby dugout. Sergeant Hall took out one machine-gun nest single-handedly but was killed in action trying to take out another. Sergeant Foster single-handedly captured a machine-gun nest, killing some enemy soldiers and capturing eighteen. Corporal James D. Heriot, with fixed bayonet, charged an enemy position under withering fire, forcing them to surrender; later in the day he was killed in an attack on another position. Sergeant Richmond H. Hilton and Corporal John C. Villepigue were both members of Company M. Sergeant Hilton attacked a machine-gun emplacement, killing six of the enemy and capturing ten. “In the course of this daring exploit he received a wound from a bursting shell, which resulted in the loss of his arm.” Corporal Villepigue rushed 150 yards across open terrain to take a machine-gun position, killing or capturing the crew and guns. In the Nicaragua Campaign one South Carolinian earned the Medal. Marine Corporal Donald LeRoy Truesdale, while assigned to a patrol of the Nicaraguan Guardia Nacional, saved members of his patrol by “taking the full shock” of a live grenade himself.

Five South Carolinians were awarded the Medal of Honor during World War II. In the Battle for Bougainville in the Solomon Islands, Marine Corporal Robert Allen Owens charged an enemy bunker, dove through the gun port, and routed the defenders; he was fatally wounded in the assault, but his heroic actions “contributed immeasurably to the success of the vital landing operations.” In Italy, Private First Class Furman L. Smith refused to leave his wounded comrades and, in defending them against a German counterattack, “stood his ground until shot down and killed, rifle in hand.” In the Hurtgen Forest in Germany, Lieutenant Colonel George L. Mabry Jr. personally led his men with daring skill and bravery and in hand-to-hand combat captured key enemy positions “in an operation of major importance.” In Leyte in the Philippines, Private First Class William A. McWhorter threw himself on an enemy grenade, saving his comrade and his machine gun. At Luzon in the Philippines, Private First Class Thomas E. Atkins, though severely wounded, held his position for hours “against the main force of repeated enemy attacks” and enabled “his comrades to maintain their lines

against a numerically superior enemy force.”

Of the four South Carolinians who received the Medal of Honor for gallantry in Korea, three of them received the award posthumously. Private First Class Noah O. Knight, in action near Kowang-San, repeatedly exposed himself to enemy fire in defending his company’s position against a relentless wave of enemy assaults; he was mortally wounded in thwarting an enemy infiltration team. Marine Staff Sergeant Lewis G. Watkins, although painfully wounded, led his unit in an assault against an entrenched enemy position; he was mortally wounded when trying to throw an enemy grenade away from his position. Private First Class Charles H. Barker, in action near Sokkogae, volunteered to cover the withdrawal of his patrol and “was last seen in close hand-to-hand combat with the enemy.” North of Yudamni, Marine Staff Sergeant Robert S. Kennemore assumed command of his platoon, rallied them, and when a grenade landed in a defensive position, threw himself on it to save his comrades.

During the Vietnam conflict, seven South Carolinians were awarded the Medal of Honor. First Lieutenant Charles Q. Williams, although seriously wounded (on four separate occasions), successfully led a determined fourteen-hour defense of a Special Forces camp in Dong Xoai against a relentless Viet Cong assault; then he oversaw the safe evacuation of all personnel by helicopter. Boatswain’s Mate First Class James Elliott Williams, while on river patrol along the Mekong River, “with utter disregard for his own safety” led his two patrol boats in a daring attack on numerically superior forces that resulted in the destruction of fifty enemy sampans and eight enemy junks. Sergeant First Class Webster Anderson, although seriously wounded twice and unable to stand, successfully directed the defense of his artillery battery’s position near Tam Ky against a determined enemy assault that had breached the unit’s perimeter.

Private First Class Ralph H. Johnson, while manning an observation post during Operation ROCK in the Quan Duc Valley, was killed instantly when he threw himself on a grenade to save his fellow Marines. Staff Sergeant Joe Ronnie Hooper, although seriously wounded, led his squad in action near Hue; he single-handedly destroyed or neutralized nine enemy bunkers and four fortified buildings and rescued wounded comrades. His inspiring leadership and valor “were directly responsible for the company’s success.” Lance Corporal James D. Howe, while in a defensive position in a sandy beach area, threw himself on a grenade during a sapper attack, protecting the lives of his fellow Marines. The last Medal of Honor awarded during the Vietnam conflict went to Petty Officer Michael Edwin Thornton. On Halloween night, 1972, Thornton and his team leader participated in a Vietnamese SEAL patrol in enemy territory. Encountering superior forces, the patrol began to withdraw; learning that his team leader was down, Thornton returned through a hail of enemy fire and rescued the man and was responsible for the safe extraction of all patrol members.

Thirty native sons of the Palmetto State have been awarded the Medal of Honor; eleven of the awards have been posthumous. The first South Carolinian to receive the

nation's highest honor received it for valor in the Indian wars in the American West in 1890; the last recipient received it for heroism in the Republic of South Vietnam in 1972. Listed by conflict, eight men received the Medal of Honor in World War I, seven in Vietnam, five in World War II, four in Korea, two in Mexico, and one each in Chile, Nicaragua, the Philippines, and South Dakota.

Eighteen were in the Army; six were in the Navy; and six were in the Marines. They came from all walks of life and from all corners of the state. Charleston County has produced five recipients, followed by Pickens County with four. Spartanburg and Kershaw counties claim three each; Greenville, Anderson, and York counties have had two each; and Beaufort, Chesterfield, Colleton, Fairfield, Newberry, Oconee, Orangeburg, Richland, and Sumter counties have had one each.

Reading the citations of these men is awe-inspiring. Each one is a lesson in gallantry, courage, and bravery. South Carolina is proud of her native sons. We and the rest of our nation owe them much.

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