

# ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

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## Decorations Medals and Recognitions of Valor

By **Shae Smith Cox**, Texas A&M University

When thinking of valor, service, and sacrifice to one's country, many consider the Medal of Honor. Created to distinguish and honor the very best, the Congressional Medal of Honor has surprisingly little secondary literature about its origins, history, and standards. There are some famous stories about the first recipients in the Civil War era and single biographies, but how people honor or recognize achievements is less studied. From the Civil War to the Great War the Medal of Honor underwent changes in standards, a scrutinizing review period with almost 1,000 medals revoked from recipients, as well as design changes. While significant, the Medal of Honor was not the only way that many from Civil War society could or chose to recognize and remember their achievements. United States veterans and civilians wanted to celebrate the memory of war and their sacrifice through the creation of commemorative organizations such as the Grand Army of the Republic and the Woman's Relief Corp. Confederates also wanted recognition and narrative control, so they formed the United Confederate Veterans and the United Daughters of the Confederacy. All four of these organizations crafted membership badges and commemorative objects symbolizing their commitment to their beliefs. Through objects, these groups teach us that the physical items that we bestow on those who demonstrate valor shape how we remember the Civil War.

In August 1782, General George Washington created three military badges to honor the merit of common soldiers, one titled the Badge of Military Merit. According to Washington's General Orders, the badge resembled a purple heart made out of cloth or silk with the word merit embroidered on the front. This item honored a soldier that performed a "meritorious action" setting a precedent for creating military symbols of recognition for extraordinary actions.<sup>1</sup> This award fell into disuse post-Revolution. Following in the footsteps of General George Washington's establishment of the Badge of Military Merit, the idea of a medal of individual valor was proposed

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<sup>1</sup> "Military Badges," George Washington's Mount Vernon, <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/military-badges/>, accessed August 17, 2024.

to General-in-Chief of the US Army Winfield Scott, but he rejected the notion. Dissatisfied by that rejection, Senator James W. Grimes proposed the creation of a Navy medal of valor. On December 21, 1861, President Abraham Lincoln signed into law Public Resolution 82 creating the award. This award was “to be bestowed upon such petty officers, seamen, landsmen and marines as shall most distinguish themselves by their gallantry and other seamanlike qualities during the present war.”<sup>2</sup> Lincoln also signed a similarly worded resolution into law for the Army, proposed by Senator Henry Wilson, on July 12, 1862 recognizing “such noncommissioned officers and privates as shall most distinguish themselves by their gallantry in action, and other soldierlike qualities, during the present insurrection.”<sup>3</sup> Congress originally established the Medal of Honor as “the highest military decoration” that the nation may award a service member during the Civil War but it became a permanent decoration in 1863.

The 1860s Medal of Honor contained three pieces: the pin (bronze colored metal) with shield insignia; a red, white, and blue ribbon; and a bronze eagle atop two cannons attached to a bronze five-point star with the Roman goddess Minerva brandishing her shield and ax, crushing a secessionist South encircled in stars, known as “Minerva repelling discord.”<sup>4</sup>

During the war, servicemen typically applied to receive the Medal of Honor through their commanding officers. However, as of May 17, 1864, certain seaman who distinguished themselves in battle or performed extraordinary heroism became eligible for recommendation by “their commanding officer, approved by the flag-officer and the department,” and received “a gratuity of one hundred dollars, and a medal of honor to be prepared by the navy department.”<sup>5</sup>

On March 25, 1863, Secretary of War Edwin Stanton presented the very first Medals of Honor and \$100 each to six men: E. H. Mason, Jacob Parrott, William Pettinger, Robert Buffum, William Reddick, and William Benninger. These men participated in a raiding mission led by civilian James J. Andrews. Andrews guided twenty-two men into enemy territory in Georgia with the purpose of stealing Confederate trains and destroying supply lines. Once discovered, the Confederates hanged seven of the raiding party, including Andrews, and imprisoned the rest. Those released from prison first received the first medals and higher positions in the volunteer army. From September 1863 to the post-war era, the other individuals from the raiding party

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<sup>2</sup> Armed Forces Information Services of the US Department of Defense, *Armed Forces Decorations and Awards* (Washington, D.C.: Government Publishing Office, 1992), 4.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> “Uncommon Design, Uncommon Valor,” U.S. Patent and Trademark Office, <https://www.uspto.gov/learning-and-resources/journeys-innovation/historical-stories/uncommon-design-uncommon-valor>, accessed August 17, 2024.

<sup>5</sup> An Act to appoint certain Officers of the Navy, Pub. L. No. 89-38, 13 Stat. 79 (1864).

received the medal for their actions, including posthumous awards for the seven that were hanged. Andrews, the leader of the raiding party, was ineligible for the Medal of Honor because of his civilian status.<sup>6</sup>

As time progressed and standards shifted, actions considered meritorious during the Civil War are not necessarily recognized by the Armed Services as Medal of Honor worthy today. This was the case of Willie Johnston from the 3<sup>rd</sup> Vermont Infantry. At thirteen, the Government awarded Johnston a medal “for his heroic conduct in the seven days fight before Richmond.” Upon retreat, “strong men threw away their guns, knapsacks and blankets,” which would weigh them down but “this little fellow kept his drum and brought it safely to Harrison’s Landing,” whereas because he had the only drum from the field, “he had the honor of drumming for division parade.” The War Department received the story from his division commander and Johnston was “presented with the Star Medal of Honor, by Secretary Stanton in person.”<sup>7</sup> Johnston did not save a life or the flag, but he saved his drum and showed courage during retreat. Another unconventional and controversial instance of awarded medals took place on the eve of the Battle of Gettysburg. All of the members of the 27<sup>th</sup> Maine regiment volunteered to remain in service even though their terms expired, freeing them from obligation and peril.<sup>8</sup> Unlike Johnston, the 27<sup>th</sup> Maine’s medals were rescinded due to further evaluation.

There were also actions that were seen as noteworthy but did not result in a medal. According to the American Battlefield Trust, unlike the US, the Confederate Army did not create combat medals. General Robert E. Lee believed that the highest honor for a soldier was to be “mentioned in dispatches,” so, having your name included in an officer’s report for notable and gallant conduct.<sup>9</sup> The use of brevet promotion, a reward bestowed upon an individual for outstanding service and meritorious conduct, caused confusion because of its extensive use during the U.S. Civil War. Most brevets were a simple way to honor a person and could be awarded after the end of the war.<sup>10</sup>

On November 11, 1865, President Andrew Johnson bestowed the Medal of Honor upon Dr. Mary Edwards Walker. She was a noted contract surgeon for the US both on the field of battle

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<sup>6</sup> “The First Award of Soldiers’ Medals,” *Daily National Republican* (Washington, D.C.), March 26, 1863. James Gindlesperger, “The Great Locomotive Chase: The First Awarded Medal of Honor,” Congressional Medal of Honor Society, March 25, 2022, <https://www.cmoths.org/news-events/history/the-great-locomotive-chase-the-first-awarded-medal-of-honor/>, accessed August 17, 2024.

<sup>7</sup> “A Brave Drummer Boy,” *Rutland Weekly Herald* (Rutland, Vermont), November 5, 1863.

<sup>8</sup> “The Medal of Honor of the United States,” *Iron County Register* (Ironton, Missouri) July 5, 1917.

<sup>9</sup> American Battlefield Trust, <https://www.battlefields.org/learn/articles/civil-war-facts#Did%20anybody%20receive%20the%20Medal%20of%20Honor%20in%20the%20Civil%20War?>

<sup>10</sup> Roger D. Hunt and Jack R. Brown, *Brevet Brigadier Generals in Blue*, Old Soldier Books, 1990, v-xx.

and in hospitals. While she was a civilian which he knew was unorthodox, Johnson believed that her meritorious services in her medical work her being a prisoner of war for four months in the South, deemed her worthy of such an honor. She was the only woman from the Civil War awarded the Medal of Honor.<sup>11</sup>

Immediately after the Civil War, men and women crafted memorial organizations to commemorate their service and sacrifice. In 1866, Union veteran Benjamin Franklin Stephenson created the Grand Army of the Republic post in Illinois. This became the foremost Union veteran organization, and it operated much like the military. The GAR adopted their official membership badge in October 1869. The original membership badges were supposedly cast in bronze melted down from a captured Confederate cannon. It had the same eagle atop two cannons as the Medal of Honor, a “miniature strap and ribbon” of the original thirteen-star US flag, and was attached to the bronze star of the membership badge. The auxiliary group to the GAR, the Woman’s Relief Corp., began in 1879 but was not officially recognized by the GAR until 1883. Their purpose was and is to perpetuate the memory of the GAR and to be a charitable organization. That said, the WRC crafted their own distinct membership badge. The WRC adopted their official badge according to their resolutions in July 1884 at their national convention. This badge was “a Maltese cross of copper bronze, with the Grand Army medallion suspended from a bar pin, bearing the initials, ‘F.C.L.’ (Fraternity, Charity, Loyalty), by a red, white and blue ribbon.”<sup>12</sup>

While there were Confederate veteran organizations immediately post-war, the United Confederate Veterans became the official home of these disparate groups in New Orleans in 1889. The UCV implemented more relaxed official badge requirements than the US veterans simply consisting of an enamel representation of the Confederate battle-flag on a plain metal surface.<sup>13</sup> Various benevolent and memorial societies organized and provided Confederate veterans with assistance, however, the incorporation of the United Daughters of the Confederacy in 1894 supplanted the rest. Unlike the WRC, the UDC was not an auxiliary group. Their purpose was to “honor the memory of those who served and those who fell in service of the Confederate States,” but it is also to “record the part taken by Southern women,” which means honoring and memorializing themselves and their narrative by using objects. Just like the other memorial groups, the UDC created a membership badge to distinguish themselves from the rest of society, demonstrating their position and honoring their service. Their badge is a “representation of the

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<sup>11</sup> “Dr. Mary Edwards Walker Collection,” Oswego County Historical Society, <https://nyheritage.org/collections/dr-mary-edwards-walker-collection> , accessed August 17, 2024.

<sup>12</sup> Shae Smith Cox, *The Fabric of Civil War Society: Uniforms, Badges, and Flags, 1859-1939* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2024), 145, 148-9, 153.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

Confederate flag (stars and bars) in white, blue and scarlet enamel, surrounded by a laurel wreath with the monogram, D.C. under the flag, and dates '61-65' on loops of bow tying [sic] wreath.”<sup>14</sup>

The women of the WRC and UDC specifically created these badges for themselves as tangible representations of their own sacrifice and the honor that they claimed by being members of the elite organizations. They wanted their service to their respective loyalties and veterans recognized and revered.

The organizational badges were complex items containing multiple mediums and pieces of silk, metal, celluloid, or grosgrain ribbon, pinned or pieced together. These groups created a variety of badges for a multitude of reasons and occasions. They commemorated everything from the official organizational badge to national/regional meetings, monument unveilings, achieving higher positions in the organizations, or the death of important figures. They used these objects to remember the past, but also as official methods of claiming a position of power for themselves in the present and future. Much like the Medal of Honor, the organizational badges symbolized tangible and sentimental ornaments of service, sacrifice, and identity for the men and women that wore them. Badge and ribbon companies worked with both US and Confederate memorial groups when creating badges for different occasions. For the GAR, WRC, and UDC, the member paid for and received a badge once their application was accepted. This welcomed them into the respective group and provided them with a legacy of legitimacy. Those who wore the badges were in good standing with the organization. If they dishonored the organization their badge and membership could be revoked.

As time passed, the 1880s and 90s saw the harsh memories of war begin to fade. This new congeniality between opposing veterans' groups opened the doors for the organizational memory machines to grow and thrive, which led to a renewed interest in the Medal of Honor. Because of the popularity and acceptance of both the US and Confederate veterans' commemoration, a “second wave of issuances” exploded in the late 1880s to mid-1890s, directly correlating with the popularity of veterans' groups. This comradery encouraged US veterans to self-submit (or nominate others') stories from combat in an effort to obtain recognition. Due to the rush of self-nominations from actions thirty years before, in 1897, the Medal of Honor implemented additional standards such as eyewitness statements, the requirement that a submission must be received within one year of the deed, and the rule that applicants were no longer allowed self-nomination for the award increasing the count by 500 more Medals of Honor awarded to Civil War veterans between 1891 and 1897.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 164 and <https://hqudc.org/history-of-the-united-daughters-of-the-confederacy/>.

Within the same time frame as the second surge in issuing the Medal of Honor to Civil War veterans, the UDC crafted a new award to include Confederate veterans in the memorialization fervor. In 1898, Mrs. Alexander S. Erwin created the Southern Cross of Honor, which they believed was the “universal symbol of the highest dignity, honor, and self-sacrifice.” The front of the medal displays a cross with the Confederate battle flag enclosed by a laurel wreath with the medal’s name. On the back, the Confederacy’s unofficial motto, *Deo Vindice* is inscribed translating to God our Vindicator. One of the most prestigious awards bestowed by the UDC, they created it for the UCV to memorialize their patriotism and courage to the Confederacy.<sup>15</sup> This is significant because Confederate government awards did not exist, and Confederate veterans were not eligible to receive the Congressional Medal of Honor due to their status as traitors. To receive the Southern Cross of Honor, veterans submitted information and testimony of their heroic act to be reviewed by the UDC. Confederate Veterans deeply coveted the Southern Cross of Honor. So much so that companies often counterfeited the item and sold it as authentic. The UDC continued to present a version of the Southern Cross for Confederate descended veterans through the Vietnam War. a

As mentioned previously, the similarities between the GAR badge and the Medal of Honor caused issues among some veterans. In 1896, the military slightly changed the design from the flag-inspired ribbon to vertical stripes of red, white, and blue ribbon. The design similarities to the GAR and the WRC continually aggravated Medal of Honor recipients and Congress, who wanted to ensure that the badge was distinguishable from those created by the memorial associations. These frustrations convinced Congress to take action and call for the redesign of the MOH.

As a Medal of Honor recipient for his actions during the Battle of Cold Harbor in 1864, George Gillespie led the effort in researching and crafting the new medal. He finalized the new design and submitted it in March 1904 and received Congressional approval in April 1904. Gillespie protected the new medal and design from imitation with a design patent which was specifically authorized to preserve ornamental design of an item. The U.S. Patent Office approved the design and granted the U.S. Design patent in November 1904. This version of the medal incorporated some of the original elements such as Minerva and the five-pointed star, which is now encircled with a green wreath, but Minerva is now in profile instead of crushing a secessionist. The original red, white, and blue ribbon was replaced with a light blue ribbon with 13 stars with the bar connecting the ribbon to its other elements inscribed with “Valor,” which is now worn on the lapel instead of pinned to the recipients’ chest. According to the Patent Office, one of the major issues that veterans took with the new medal was that they actually had to exchange their old

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

medals for the new design. The second was that the medal was composed of mixed metals which veterans believed cheapened it.<sup>16</sup>

Even though Congress provided \$12,000 for the creation and distribution of 3,000 new medals, some veterans struggled with surrendering their old medals, which resulted in Congress authorizing the return of their originals in 1907.

On April 27, 1916, Congress established the Army and Navy Medal of Honor Roll, which listed the more than 3,000 recipients of the Medal of Honor to date from all wars since its creation. The value placed on receiving the Medal of Honor and the push for more veterans to apply in the second wave of issuances caused people to realize the difference in standards from the Civil War to the Great War. Due to merit concerns, Congress established the Board of Generals, a group of five retired anonymous generals in June 1916 to evaluate the Medal of Honor Roll. For the next eight months, the Board of Generals reviewed all of the recipients and sent their findings to the Army Adjutant General's office. To mitigate bias, the names of the Medal of Honor recipients were removed from the cases. The Board rescinded 911 names from the roll, specifically the members of the 27<sup>th</sup> Maine Infantry discussed above (864), President Abraham Lincoln's funeral guards (29), six civilians, and twelve others. The Board removed the 911 recipients from the roll because of confusion in Maine's case, but for most the issue was for non-valorous actions. They believed that the individuals were undeserving of the honor and that the actions did not meet the standards to receive the medal. The most notable controversy was with Dr. Walker to which the Board stated that there was "no evidence of distinguished gallantry." They also pulled the award from five civilian scouts, all men, which they believed had "rendered distinguished service in action and fully earned their medals," however, the rules did not permit them because they were not military. It was not until 1977 that Dr. Walker's Medal of Honor was reinstated and not until 1989 did the five civilians (Amos Chapman, William Cody, William Dixon, James Dozier, and William Woodall) receive their awards and have their names placed on the official Medal of Honor Roll.<sup>17</sup>

The government presented more than 1,500 Medals of Honor for those that served during the Civil War. This group set a standard for valor and service in the face of danger, laying the foundation for how to commemorate sacrifice. From the Medal of Honor to the GAR, WRC, UCV,

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<sup>16</sup> "Uncommon Design, Uncommon Valor"..

<sup>17</sup> Laura Jowdy, "The 1916 Medal of Honor Review Board," Congressional Medal of Honor Society, June 18, 2021, <https://www.cmozs.org/news-events/blog/the-1916-medal-of-honor-review-board/>, accessed August 17, 2024. Dr. Walker's original medal is at the Richardson-Bates House Museum in Oswego, New York while her restored medal is in the Pentagon Women's Corridor.

and UDC membership badges, ribbons, and commemorative tokens that celebrate the dedication of these groups to their beliefs and causes, we learn why these physical items speak louder than words and the influence that they carry in society to this day.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> To search for those who received the Medal of Honor for their efforts during the Civil War, please visit the National Parks Service [database](#).