The Cape Fear Civil War Round Table

The Medal of Honor

By Bob Cooke

"He who possesses the Medal of Honor is the holder of the highest military award for bravery that can be given to any individual in the United States of America." Thus begins a work on the medal, compiled by the United States Army in 1948. There were a total of 1,200 medals awarded during the Civil War the majority for "gallantry" in action, although an Army review board later revoked over 900 of these. Stricter rules and regulations were laid down for the award of such a high honor and it was noted that recipients (not "winners"- it is not a contest!) received a pay increase of two dollars per month. As the award is presented in the name of Congress, it is sometimes referred to as the Congressional Medal of Honor."

At both Battles of Fort Fisher, there was bravery exhibited on both sides. While the Confederacy chose to honor bravery by listing those cited on its Roll of Honor. Towards the end of the war, Richmond began to move closer to awarding an actual medal, but the medals were never struck. The Union chose to recognize those men of both the Union Army and Navy with the nation's highest award: there were nine members of the Army, six Marines (fully one-third of all such awards to the Corps during the war) and 56 sailors so honored for their actions in December (1864) and January 1865.

General Benjamin F. Butler's plan to explode (close to the fort) an old vessel loaded with well over two hundred tons of black powder was one of his more bizarre ideas, but the naval commander, Admiral David D. Porter thought it might work. Wired with "Gomez" fuses, the U.S.S. *Louisiana* was disguised as a blockade-runner and crewed by volunteers from the U.S.S. *Agawam* . Piloted by George Bowen (a Cape Fear pilot who had been captured by the U.S. Navy earlier in the war) and commanded by former Coast Survey officer, A.C. Rhind, the vessel was towed in close to the fort. After setting the fuses, the crew quickly abandoned the floating bomb and retired several miles out to sea to await the expected devastating explosion. The Louisiana was likely caught in a rip current and floated back out of range of the fort. The experiment did not go as planned: the powder failed to detonate simultaneously and as Commander Rhind watched, he said, "There's a fizzle!" All who volunteered to crew the powder ship received the Medal of Honor.

The following day, the men-of-war off the fort began to shell the fort and shortly after the Army began landing troops. They quickly moved on the fort and halted less than one hundred yards from the parapets. Unknown to the men, their commander (Major General Benjamin F. Butler) had decided to withdraw after pronouncing the fort still too powerful. One of those nearest the fort was young Lieutenant William H. Walling of the 142nd New York Infantry. As he and his

men watched the bombardment, a shell took down a flagpole and it fell between the palisade fence and the earthen walls of the fort. Exhibiting reckless bravery, Lt. Walling told his men: "I'll go and get the flag; you keep a sharp lookout for the riflemen on the works." With this, he started off to "capture" the flag even though the shells of the fleet were exploding nearby. He was successful and returned unscathed and "thus was Lieutenant Walling the only Union man who in [the Butler] expedition had set his foot upon the rebel stronghold." For his action that day, Lt. Walling was awarded the Medal of Honor.

Butler's attempt to take Fort Fisher ended in dismal failure, but yet another joint operation was quickly mounted. Now in command of the Army was Major General Alfred H. Terry, while Admiral Porter remained in charge of the fleet. In January 1865, the guns of the mighty fleet again pounded their iron missiles into the fort. Admiral Porter at one point wrote that his gunners were firing at such a rapid rate that the shells were exploding in the fort two or three a second. The bombardment did not come without a cost to the tars however; several of the larger cannon aboard the ships exploded and killed many of those gunners. Aboard the U.S.S. Ticonderoga "the deck of the [ship] had to be covered with sand to absorb the blood of the dead and wounded sailors. Noting the demoralizing effect the explosion of the Parrot rifle and the sight of the bloody, mangled bodies...Coxswain William Shipman...encouraged his gunners to do their duty." "Go ahead boys! This is only the fortunes of war," he shouted. Shipman, along with eight other shipmates were awarded the nation's highest award. Crewmen from several other ships also received the honor: aboard the U.S.S. Pontoosuc, seven men (five for their bravery aboard ship, two for their gallantry in the naval column assault on land.) Aboard the U.S.S. New Ironsides, another eight men received the award. The U.S.ships Canonicus, Monadnock, Rhode Island and Nereus all had one member to receive the medal. The Santiago de Cuba provided a boat and crew for "one of the generals on shore"; these men stayed with the general and not only acted as couriers when needed, but also took part in the attack and gained entry into the fort. Six men (two of whom took part in the failed naval column assault) thus became the recipients of the medal.

Some two thousand sailors and Marines stormed the fort along the ocean side of the peninsula attacking probably the strongest portion of the fort. They failed to reach their objective; many of them fell before reaching the palisade fence which stretched from the river to the ocean.

Seven men from the U.S.S. Minnesota, as well as three men from the U.S.S. Wabash, one each from the U.S.S. Seneca and the U.S.S. Susquehanna had the honor bestowed upon them for their gallantry during the naval assault along the ocean side of the fort. In all, the Navy honored fifty-five sailors and six U.S. Marines for their actions at both battles of Fort Fisher.

As for the Army, there were eight more medals given to the bravest of the brave. Volunteers were picked and armed with only axes, were sent out to widen any holes blown by the heavy shelling to the palisade fence. It fell to the lot of the 142nd New York (Lt. Walling's regiment) to send a dozen men forward. Of these, eight were shot and killed; the four survivors (Zachariah C. Neahr, Bruce Anderson, Alaric B. Chapin, George Merrill) were awarded the Medal of Honor. William H. Freeman, of the 169th N.Y. received his medal after he rushed "to carry the brigade flag after the bearer was wounded." Also noted for exceptional gallantry were Colonel Galusha Pennypacker (of the 97th Pennsylvania), Brigadier General Newton Martin Curtis and First Lieutenant John Wainwright (also of the 97th Pa.); all of these men were wounded. It is interesting to note an advertisement of the 97th Pa. Which read:

Some more interesting facts about these men and the Medal of Honor: At least one of them (Bruce Anderson of the 142nd N.Y.) appears to have been an African-American (see website: http://www.itd.nps.gov/cwss/history/aa_history.htm-"African-American Medal of Honor Recipients") while another, George Merrill (also of the 142nd), had his certificate and medal stolen after his descendants allowed a company to redo and "update" the display which hung in the local town hall.

Galusha Pennypacker died in October 1916, from "complications from the wound he received at Fort Fisher."

Colonel John Wainwright, who died in 1915, is buried in Arlington National cemetery. He enlisted as a Private on 18 April 1861 and was commissioned 10 January 1862. By August 1864 (while a First Lieutenant) he was placed in command of his company and would remain in command until after the battles at Fort Fisher.

There were at least two (perhaps as many as five) recipients awarded the Medal of Honor twice during the Civil War: John Conner, USN was awarded the distinction twice. Thomas W. Custer, brother of George A. Custer was also awarded twice. Custer's awards came at the end of the war, at Namozine Church (3 April 1865) and Saylor's Creek (6 April 1865). Both awards were granted when he captured Confederate regimental flags.

[Information gathered from Dr. Chris E. Fonvielle, Jr., The Wilmington Campaign: Last Rays of Departing Hope; The Medal of Honor of the United States Army, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 1948; Above and Beyond: A History of the Medal of Honor from the Civil War to Vietnam, Boston Publishing Co., Editors, 1985. Websites: Genealogy Trails; Findagrave; Wikipedia.]

✸✸✸✸✸✸✸✸✸✸✸✸✸