SIGNAL CORPS ASSOCIATION
1860 1865

Private Lane's Gold Medal

By Paul J. Scheips *

Today's Army Medal of Honor, "bronze, wreathed in green enamel and held by a white-starred ribbon of blue silk," is "the highest military award for bravery that can be given to any individual in the United States of America."[1] In the past, however, it was not always given according to the present standards, for, as the Medal itself, its standards have changed since it was authorized in 1862 and 1863.[2]

Col. Bernard J. D. Irwin performed the first valorous deed for which a Medal was later awarded. On 13-14 February 1861, before the Medal was created, Irwin, an assistant surgeon at Ft. Breckenridge, in what is now the state of Arizona, voluntarily led a small relief expedition that rescued a party surrounded by Chiricahua Apaches. For his efforts he was awarded the Medal of Honor in 1894, despite legislation which authorized the Medal for deeds "during the present insurrection" and later.[3]

The first actual awards for the Army Medal were given on 25 March 1863 to 6 of the 22 men (among whom were 2 civilians), who, in 1862, under James J. Andrews, penetrated the Confederacy, stole a train at Big Shanty, Georgia, and sought to destroy the Western & Atlantic Railroad on the way north to Chattanooga. Eventually 19 of the group received the Medal, some posthumously.[4] The earliest Civil War deed to win the Medal was the killing of Pvt. Francis E. Brownell of the innkeeper who murdered Lincoln's dashing young friend, Col. Elmer E. Ellsworth, at Marshall House, Alexandria, Virginia, 24 May 1861.[5]

The strangest chapter in the Medal's history is that of its award to every man in the 27th Main Infantry Regiment. On 25 June 1863 the regiment arrived at Arlington Heights, Virginia, preparatory to being sent home for mustering out, in term of service being about to expire. On one account Lee's invasion of Pennsylvania, however, the President asked the regiment to remain in service a short time longer, whereupon about 300 officers and enlisted men volunteered to remain. They helped guard Arlington defenses of Washington until the results of the Battle of Gettysburg were known. They were sent home on 4 July, three days after the other part of the regiment had been sent on. Soon the entire regiment was mustered out in Portland, Maine. The War Department intended to ward the Medal of Honor to those who agreed to remain beyond the expiration of their enlistment, "but, evidently through inadvertence, the medal was also issued to about 560 members of the regiment who did not volunteer to remain in service-864 altogether. The records do not show the names of the men in either group. These 864 Medals represented a substantial percentage of the 2,625 awarded by 17 January 1917, by which time a special board completed its review of all awards to that date to determine "what medals of honor, if any, have been awarded of issued for cause other than

distinguished conduct… involving actual conflict with an enemy…" Of the 2,625 holders of the Medal, 911, of whom 864 were those of the old 27th Maine, were struck from the rolls on 15 February 1917.[6]

The writer has not ascertained how many Medals given for deeds of valor in the Civil War went to men for their capture of flags or other banners, but it is safe to say that was one of the most common reasons for the award. Thus, there are 14 holders of the Medal listed on the page of the published record whereon Morgan D. Lane's name appears. Of these, 10 received the Medal for capturing a flag. In some cases the flag is not even identified in the citations. In an additional case listed on the same page, that of Sgt. Charles E. Wilson, the citation reads: "Charged the enemy's works, colors in hand, and had two horses shot under him."[7] Flags or colors, or even lesser banners, always have been cherished symbols, but never more cherished by Johnny Reb, Billy Yank, and the armies they served. Lest, however, it be thought that the symbol has lost its hold in our own sophisticated century, one needs only recall the planting of the national colors atop Mt. Suribachi in 1945 and the attendant publicity-albeit without benefit of any Medal of Honor.[8]

It goes without saying that case histories of all the awards to Civil War soldiers would reveal much about the Medal, the war, and the men who won the war. An account of only one award and the life of its beneficiary taken more or less at random can tell only a fraction of the entire story, yet it might be more or less typical, and it is likely to be a very human account. Such is the account of Private Lane and his gold medal.

Morgan D. Lane born in Monroe, New York, sometime in the mid-1840'2, worked on a farm before his enlistment in the Army. At that time he was his mothers only living son, six other sons having died as little boys. Lane was a short man, only five feet five and one-half inches in height. He had a dark complexion, dark hair, and black eyes. His military service began with the enlistment in Company I, 5th Regiment of Michigan Cavalry, at Allegan, Michigan, 22 August 1862. His birthday is not known. Although his enlistment records shows him as 18 years of age in 1862, a Congressional report of many years later, which recommended a pension for him, stated that he was only 15 at the time of his enlistment and 17 in April 1865. Perhaps he lied about his age in order to enlist. In the Cavalry he rose to the rank of sergeant, but in March 1864 he transferred to the Signal Corps and was appointed a second-class private from 1 April 1864. His entire service was in the Army of the Potomac, from which he was honorably discharged on 24 June 1865. After November 1864 he served in the 5th Corps, to whose headquarters he was attached in early April 1865 as orderly of Lt. P. H. Niles, a Signal Corps officer.[9]

On 6 April 1865, during the pursuit of Lee's army that ended at Appomattox three days later, an event occurred that brought Lane the Medal of Honor. It is described in the following words of Lt. Niles, which are quoted in the report of Capt. Charles L. Davis, Chief Signal Officer, Army of the Potomac, 20 April 1865:

On the 6th of April, 1865, near Jetersville, Va., in company with Captain Benyaurd, U. S. Engineers, and my orderly, Private Lane, and in advance of the army, we pursued and captured 7 rebels, viz, 2 naval officers, 1 engineer, 1 acting signal officer (all of the rebel gun-boat Nansemond), and 3 enlisted men. The flag of the gunboat Nansemond was secured from one of these enlisted men by Second-Class Private Morgan D. Lane, U. S. Signal Corps.[10]

Jetersville (correctly spelled with one "t") is a small town, with only about 200 inhabitants as recently as 1940, about midway between Appomattox on the west and Petersburg on the east. It is in Amelia County on the Southern Railroad, which in 1865 was the Danville & Richmond Railroad. On 5 April 1865, the day before the capture of the "Nansemond's" flag, a temporary Union signal station had been established on a house in Jetersville, but whether or not Lane served there we do not know.[11]

The "C. S. S. Nansemond," which bore the name of a Virginia tidewater town, county, and river, was a small vessel belonging to the Confederate James River Squadron. It was a wooden steamer of about 80 tons and carried a battery of two guns. Built at Norfolk in 1862, it was burned by the Confederates on 4 April 1865 upon the evacuation of Richmond, two days before Lane captured its flag. There was also a Union naval vessel of the same name.[12]

In early 1866 Lane sent to Congressman Charles Upson of Michigan the following account of the events of 6 April 1865, which is slightly at variance with Niles's official report as already quoted:

… On the 6th day of April, 1865, on Lee's retreat from Richmond at Jetersville, Va. {,} I had the honor of capturing the Commdg Officer of the Rebel Gunboat *Nansemond* . . . . {He} blew up his boat {,} put its Flag on his person and left with the Army {.} I took him prisoner and secured his flag. Capt. *Chas L. Davis* . . . took the flag from me {,} gave me a Furlough of thirty days from the 22d of April until the 22d of May {,} promising to forward the Flag to the War Department and secure for me a Gold Medal.

"I have never seen or heard anything of the Medal," he told the Congressman." If you can find any reason why I have never received the same reward others did I would like to have you do so if it can be done at a reasonable expense {.}"

Upson forwarded Lane's letter to the War Department which sought to locate the "Nansemond's" flag to substantiate Lane's claim that he had captured it, but the search was in vain. When, however, in March 1866, the letter reached Chief Signal Officer, Col. Benjamin F. Fisher, he was able to endorse it by quoting from Capt. Davis' report, which, of course, substantiated Lane's claim that he had secured the flag, albeit from one of the enlisted men, not from the "Namsemond's" commanding officer as Lane recalled.

Fisher's endorsement of 14 March 1866 was all the evidence the War Department required to award the Medal of Honor to Lane, for two days later the award was made. It was apparently sent him forthwith, for on 17 April 1866 he wrote from his home in Bloomingdale, Michigan, to acknowledge "receipt of the Medal presented to me by Congress for the Capture of the Rebel Flag. {I} should have done so before but was absent from home."[13]

The citation simply stated that the Medal was given for the "capture of flag of gunboat *Nansemond*."[14] Although Lane was the first member of the Signal Corps and the only member of the Civil War Corps to win the Medal of Honor (which only four other members of the Corps have won subsequently[15]), his award only received a passing mention in J. Willard Brown's long and detailed history. There, in a long quotation from an account by Capt. O. H. Howard, who was Sheridan's chief signal officer during the Shenandoah Campaign, appears this brief reference: "On the morning of the 6th of April, Private Morgan D. Lane captured, while in advance of the 5th Corps, near Jettersville, a

Confederate, from whom he took the flag of the rebel gunboat Nansemond, for which action he was awarded a medal of honor."[16]

After his discharge from the Army, Lane returned to Michigan and apparently school, but as the years passed he suffered increasingly from rheumatism, which he claimed he contracted in the Army in the winter of 1864-65, and from heart disease, perhaps brought on by the rheumatism. He had not been hospitalized in the Army, however, and therefore was never able to convince the Pension Office that his disability was service-connected, although the medical testimony in his behalf agreed that exposure in the field was to blame. Thus, when a private bill was introduced in Congress to grant him pension, the House Committee on Invalid Pensions reported that the medical examining board found "him badly disabled with rheumatism and heart disease." In the Committee's view it was "irresistible that his disease and his present unfortunate condifore, it recommended pension. The Senate committee concurred and the bill became a law on 22 February 1891, the year before Lane's death. Thereafter, until 4 May 1892, Lane drew a pension of $17.00 a month.[17]

In 1871, in Oil City, Pennsylvania, Lane married Euphemia Mead, who seems to have been a person of some education, afterward writing social items for the Chicago *Observer* and *Saturday Evening Herald*. By the time of his marriage Lane was in the insurance business. For some years after 1874 her was with the Accident Department of the Travelers' Life and Accident Insurance Company of Hartford, Connecticut. He traveled a great deal; indeed, he was "away from home most of the time." In 1884, after an admission of infidelity on his part, he and Euphemia separated permanently, although they were never divorced. They had no children. Lane sought to return but Euphemia was adamant, and his life ended in physical and emotional misery, as well as in poverty.

During the last two years of his life Lane resided in Atchison, Kansas, with Mr. And Mrs. H. R. Anderson. During that period he was able to work only part of the time, selling insurance. He died of apoplexy on 23 June 1892 (or 22 July 1892, it is not clear which), still in his forties, and penniless. A $5,000 insurance policy had had to drop. He was buried in the t. Vernon Cemetery in Atchison. The Masons buried him, according to his friend Anderson, because "he did not leave enough money to pay for the funeral expenses." Anderson added that "the Government finished a tombstone." Dr. J. E. Rankin of Petoskey, to Mrs. Lane: "Poor Boy {,} he was in hard luck in his last years."

Subsequently, effective in 1894, despite hostility on the part of Anderson (the result of a promise made Lane, who had made countercharges against his wife, that were never proved), Mrs. Lane succeeded in getting a widow's pension. This pension, $8.00 a month, she claimed until her remarriage in 1904, when she married James Madison Hunter, who was probably the "old friend of our family" and the roomer, James M. Hunter, whose name appeared in the statements taken by the Pension office in 1898 during the defense of her pension claims. Although she was dropped from the pension rolls in1907, because she had not claimed her pension since 1904, she apparently later qualified for another small pension despite her remarriage. In 1915, after Euphemia's death, Hunter, her beneficiary, unsuccessfully sought to claim that pension.

Lane in no sense swept across the pages of history-obviously. Rather, like most of his fellow soldiers in the Civil War (or his counterparts in any war), he was swept into the dustbin of history. Yet he performed his duty as best he could and thereby served his country. He had only one moment of glory in all his life. For that he was rewarded with a

promised gold medal, which turned out to be the Medal of Honor. It was not his fault that the Medal was not in his day that which it has since become. His life was a personal tragedy, but who is to say that it was not his war service, to which he gave his best, that left him defenseless and brought him to a lonely end before his time?

At Ft. Monmouth, New Jersey, Lane Avenue and Lane Hall, a non-commissioned officers' mess on Riverside Avenue, commemorate the first Signal Corps winner of the Medal of Honor.[18] At Ft. Huachuca, Arizona, hard by the Mexican border, it is planned to name the enlisted men's barracks after him.[19] It is all small comfort to Lane, but he would be pleased if he knew. As for Euphemia, knowing that others thought well of Morgan might put her, at long last, in a forgiving mood.

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[1] Pub. Inform. Div., U. S. Dept. of the Army, *The Medal of Honor of the United States Army* (Washington: Government printing office, 1948), p. 3. Except where other references are cited, the following introductory passages are based upon *ibid*., pp. 5-7, 20-21, 108-109, and *passim*. We are here concerned with the Army Medal of Honor. The Navy Medal was authorized by legislation approved 21 December 1861, the year before the first legislation authorizing the Army Medal (see the following note).

[2] For legislation governing both the Army and Navy Medals of Honor, see 12 *Statuses at Large* (1859-63), 330, 585, 623-24, 751.

[3] See Irwin's Medal of Honor file, A. G. 3977 PRD 93, R. G. 94, The National Archives.

[4] William Pittenger (the Medal of Honor Board file spells it Pettinger), one of six men who received the first Medals for this enterprise, wrote *Daring and Suffering: A History of the Great Railroad Adventure* (Philadelphia: J. W. Daughaday, Publisher, 1863). This was reissued, sometimes in new editions, in 1864, 1882 [1881], 1885, 1887, 1889, 1910, and 1917, the titles varying. The third case edition, e.g., was called *The Great Locomotive Chase: A History of the Andrews Railroad Raid into Georgia in 1862* (3d ed.; New York: J. B. Alden Publisher, 1889). In 1956 MacLennan Roberts published *The Great Locomotive Chase* {New York: Dell Publishing Co}, and, about the same time, Walt Disney also produced a moving picture on the same subject. See Disney Productions, *Walt Disney's The Great Locomotive Chase: A True Spy Story of the Civil War* (Based on Walt Disney's Motion Picture; Story Adapted by Charles Verral {New York: Simon and Schuster, c. 1956}).

[5] Margaret Leech has some colorful descriptions of Ellsworth and his Zouaves, his death and funeral, as well as of Brownell's part in the episode, in her *Revival in Washington* 1860-1865 (New York: Harper and Bros., Publishers, c. 1941), pp. 40-41, 80-82, and *passim*.

[6] See A. G. 2411162, R. G. 94, The National Archives; and *the Medal of Honor of the United States Army*, pp. 20-21, which sites the A. G. file, but makes only a brief reference to the matter of the 27th Maine. The Medal of Honor Board that reviewed all the Medals awarded down to the early 1917 was created by legislation of 3 June 1916.

[7] *The Medal of Honor of the United States Army*, p. 201. The facing page (p. 200) also lists 14 holders of the Medal; 12 of that number received the Medal for either the capture of a flag (or two flags in one case) or for a deed in which the capture of a flag (or a stand of colors in one instance) figured.

[8] The raising of the flag on Suribachi was a Marine Corps-Navy, not an Army, feat, but won no Navy Medals for the men.

[9] A copy of Lane's military history, as compiled by the Signal Corps, is in his wife's pension file, WC 460-861 (Euphemia M. Lane), R. G. 94, The National Archives. This file consolidates Lane's pension file with that of his wife and is an excellent source of information. Except as otherwise noted, the following account is based upon the correspondence, medical reports, depositions, and other documents in that file. See also Capt. Davis' report of 20 April 1865 as printed in U. S. War Dept., *The War of the Rebellion: . . . the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* [hereafter OR, Army] (130 vols.; Washington: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Ser. I, Vol. XLVI (Pt. 3), p. 851.

[10] OR, Army, Ser. I, Vol. XLVI (Pr. 3), p. 851.

[11] An account of this station is in J. Willard Brown, *The Signal Corps, U. S. A., in the War of the Rebellion* (Boston: U. S. Veteran Signal Corps Association, 1896), p. 397. A map showing the Jetersville and other signal stations in the area is idib., p. 639. Another map of the area, showing "The Pursuit to Appomattox, 3-9 April 1865," is in R. Ernest Dupuy and Trevor N. Dupuy, Military Heritage of America (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., Inc., 1956), p. 304.

[12] See U. S. Navy Dept., *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion* (30 vols.; Washington: Government Printing Office, 1894-1922), Ser. II, Vol. I, pp. 261 and passim.

[13] Upson's letter and its endorsements, Lane's 1874 injury concerning the flag of the "Nansemond," and his acknowledgement of the receipt of the Medal of Honor file, 5-U-1866, A. G. O. Ltrs. Revd., R. G. 94, The National Archives.

[14] *The Medal of Honor of the United States Army*, p. 201

[15] Will Croft Barnes (1858-1936), Charles E. Kilbourne (b. 1872), Gordon Johnston (1874-1934), and Adolphus W. Greely (1844-1935). Of these men only Greely, Chief Signal Officer 1887-1906, spent a major part of his career in the Signal Corps. Kilbourne, who retired as a major General in the Coast Artillery, is the only one of the number still living. Barnes left the Army as a young man and became one of Arizona's best known citizens. While detailed to the Signal Corps Johnston could hardly wait to return to the Cavalry, his first love

[16] Brown, *op. cit*., p. 641.

[17] See U. S. Senate, 51st Cong., 2d Sess., *Report No. 2194* (Set. 2827), which quotes the House committee report. A copy of this Senate report is in the Lane pension file, WC 460-861, *loc. Cit.*

[18] *Fort Monmouth History and Place Names*, 1917-1959 (Ft. Monmouth, N. J., 6 April 1959), pp. 53, 68, and the map opp. P. 70 This is a handsome and useful little booklet for which Helen C. Phillips, the director of the Signal Corps Museum, is responsible,

[19] My thanks for the information go to Mary Lee Marek, Chief, U. S. Army Electronic Proving Ground {Ft. Huachuca} Liaison Office, Washington, D. C.


MORGAN D LANE
MEDAL OF HONOR
US ARMY SIGNAL CORPS
CIVIL WAR