

The Anniversary of the Medal of Honor (Medal of Honor Day Observance – March 25)

By: Ron Shadrach

The first military action for which the Medal of Honor (MOH) was awarded was for the famed "Andrews Raid" or "Great Locomotive Chase". Civilian scout, James J. Andrews, led a team of twenty-two hand-picked Union Soldiers and one civilian from Ohio, 200 miles behind enemy lines to Marietta, Ga. to steal a locomotive, the "General." Their mission was to hijack a train and steam north past Chattanooga, with the intention of tearing up track, burning bridges, and cutting telegraph line to isolate Chattanooga from Atlanta and Confederate reinforcements. Meanwhile, Union General O.M. Mitchel's troops would seize Huntsville, Ala. and use its rolling stock to quickly move on the strategically important Chattanooga, once isolated. Had the plan been successful, some military historians believe it could have been a pivotal turning point perhaps ending the war within a year.



The daring mission began on April 7, 1862, when the Union Raiders left from near Shelbyville, Tenn. disguised in civilian clothing. During the four-day journey south the Raiders made their way by twos and threes through a soaking rain to a Marietta rendezvous point. Given the fretful weather, Andrew's determined that Mitchel leaving on the 8th, couldn't move his 10,000 troops and artillery through the 56 miles of muddy road and swollen creeks to take Huntsville on the morning of April 11th as planned. Andrews spread the word to take another day of it. On the morning of April 12, the Raiders boarded the early morning passenger train heading north from Marietta.

Private Alf Wilson, Company C, 21st OVI: *Before retiring, arrangements were made to have the hotel men awake us in time for the northbound train in the morning, which they promised to do without fail. No man knows what a day may bring forth. The uncertainty of what the light of the next day's sun would bring in our particular cases was the reason some of us, myself at least of the number, didn't sleep very much. By the setting of another sun we might be hanging to the limbs of some of the trees along the railroad, with an enraged populace jeering and shouting epithets; or we might leave a trail of fire and destruction behind us and come triumphantly rolling into Chattanooga and Huntsville, within the Federal lines, to receive the welcome plaudits of comrades left behind, the thanks of our general and the praise of a grateful people. Such thoughts as these weren't calculated for sound sleep, and even this broken rest wasn't to continue long. In 2 or 3 hours we were going to be called.*

When the train stopped for breakfast at Big Shanty, (now Kennesaw Ga.) the Raiders made their move unhooking the passenger cars and casually taking the engine and box cars. When ready, Andrews gave the signal, and they threw open the throttle and steamed away in front of a camp of some 3,000 Confederate soldiers with armed sentinels pacing their beats along the track.

Unfortunately for the Raiders, Mitchel had taken Huntsville on schedule. Now the single track from Chattanooga was clogged with extra south bound trains fleeing that city. Andrews knew the normal train schedule but had not counted on the extra south bound trains on that day. Initially successful in stealing the engine and box cars, heavy pursuit by the Confederates running on foot, when necessary, also used a push car and three different locomotives to bypass the sabotaged and blocked track to close in on the fleeing Union soldiers. Yet, Andrews managed to stay ahead, bluffing his hijacked train through depots and sidings, and demanding that the south bound trains pass so he could reenter the road. He claimed to be a Confederate Ordinance/Powder train critically needed by General Beauregard who had just faced Grant and Buell's Armies at the battle of Shiloh a few days earlier. All the while the lightly armed Raiders quietly hid inside the box cars, ready to make a move should Andrews' signal, or should anyone interfere.

The close Confederate pursuit eventually caught up with the Raiders not allowing them to take on much-needed water and fuel or even stop to destroy more track. Just past Ringgold the raiders were forced to flee the fagging General as the engineer tried to run it back on their pursuers. The flight for their life had begun. Within a month all the men would be captured by Rebel forces and its citizens who were now on high alert using the hound normally trained to track down the runaway slave.

The Raiders were held prisoner as bridge burners and engine thieves. Their leader, James Andrews, would be tried and executed on June 7, 1862, but not before temporarily securing his freedom for a few days one last time on June 1 in a short-lived prison break. Seven others were tried, and court marshalled as spies in Knoxville, Tn. When Mitchel's artillery batteries opened fire on Knoxville, the Raiders were quickly removed to Atlanta for safekeeping. Then, suddenly without warning, on the afternoon of June 18, 1862, the seven were taken from their cells and executed by hanging and buried at the place of execution near the Oakland Cemetery in Atlanta. The executed included Private Philip G. Shadrach and Private George D. Wilson.

When the remaining Raiders learned in October 1862, that further executions were being threatened, they devised a plan and overpowered their guards with eight of their number managing to escape along four different routes. By the fall of 1862, with the retreat of Union forces, their trek to safety would now be 400 miles. Nonetheless, in units of two, all eight would make it.

Reuniting with Union lines, word was received that some of the party remained in Confederate prison. Subsequently, arrangements were made to repatriate the six remaining Raiders. In March of 1863 they left prison in Richmond for Washington. Their presence was requested by Secretary of War Edwin Stanton. Following interviews and deposition, Stanton awarded them with the first Medals of Honor on March 25, 1863. It is for this reason that March 25th is celebrated as *Medal of Honor Day*. Federal observance of Medal of Honor Day was officially created on November 15, 1990, when President George H. W. Bush signed Public Law 101-564 passed by the 101st United States Congress.

Following the meeting with Stanton, the six Raiders visited with President Abraham Lincoln. President Lincoln later reflected on the meeting: *“their bearing and their apparent unconsciousness of having taken their lives in their hands, with the chance of death all against them, present and example of the apparent disregard of the tremendous issues of life and death which is so strong a characteristic of the American Soldier.”*

The Raiders had been gone a year with their lives in peril much of that time. They endured brutal treatment, incarceration and deprivation in Chattanooga, Knoxville, Madison, Atlanta, and Richmond. They watched eight of their comrades marched away to be executed and eight others pull off a daring escape saving their lives. They pleaded with President Jefferson Davis to spare them and nine months later accepted the congratulations and thanks of President Abraham Lincoln becoming the first men in American history to be awarded the Medal of Honor.

At the time Secretary of War Stanton awarded those first Medals of Honor, he proclaimed that all men of the party would receive the honor. In turn each of the soldiers would receive the honor excepting Shadrach and Wilson. Nineteen Medals of Honor would ultimately be awarded to members of the Andrews Raid.

Of the five who never received the Medal of Honor, in addition to Shadrach and Wilson, were civilians James J. Andrews and William H. Campbell. As civilians, they are not eligible for the military honor. However, in May 2023 President Biden was requested in writing by this author to posthumously recognize and award James Andrews and William Campbell with the *Presidential Medal of Freedom*. The other Raider that did not receive the Medal was Corporal Sam Llewellyn of the 33rd OVI Regiment. History appears to indicate that he silently turned the honor down as he apparently felt he was not deserving, having not fully participated in the mission.

On January 28, 2008, Congressional legislation authorizing Private Shadrach and Private Wilson to receive the Medal of Honor was signed into law by President George W. Bush per H.R. 4986 - 110th Congress: National Defense Authorization Act, Fiscal Year 2008. In short, it states: ***the President is authorized and requested to award the Medal of Honor under section 3741 of title 10 United States Code, posthumously to Private Philip G. Shadrach of Company K, 2nd Ohio Volunteer Infantry Regiment and George D. Wilson of Company B, 2nd Ohio Voluntary Infantry Regiment for the acts of valor described in subsection (b).*** However, over the next four Presidential administrations to date (15 years), these men remain unrecognized.

A plaque in the basement of the Ohio State House commemorates the action of the 22 Union soldiers and one civilian from Ohio for which 19 of the soldiers were awarded the Medal of Honor. Two Ohio soldiers listed on the plaque that were executed by the Confederacy as spies have yet to be rightfully acknowledged with the Medal of Honor. They are Private Philip G. (Charles P.) Shadrach and Private George D. Wilson, of the 2nd Ohio Voluntary Infantry (OVI) Regiment.

Execution of the Seven Andrews Raiders near Oakland Cemetery, Atlanta, Ga.¹



Private Shadrach, center, and Private Wilson, right, saying his last words from the gallows to the southern people.

Private George D. Wilson, Company B, 2nd OVI Regiment:

*Though surrounded by a scowling crowd, impatient for his sacrifice, he did not hesitate, while standing under the gallows, to give them a brief address. He told them that, though they were all wrong, he had no hostile feelings toward the Southern people, believing that not they but their leaders were responsible for the Rebellion; that he was no spy, as charged, but a soldier regularly detailed for military duty; that he did not regret to die for his country, but only regretted the manner of his death; and he added, for their admonition, that they would yet see the time when the old Union would be restored, and when its flag would wave over them again.*¹

When Wilson had eloquently and boldly spoken his mind, the crazy platform on which they were standing was knocked down. He, like his comrades, calmly met the ignominious doom of a felon.

Each March 25th we should not only foster appreciation and recognition of Medal of Honor recipients but also dedicate a moment in recognition of all former and current service members for their service and sacrifice on behalf of our nation... especially those left or lost in foreign land.

¹ Southern Confederacy News Article, June 1862 (an Atlanta newspaper account of the execution).