

Deeds of Valor
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United States Government
How American Heroes Won the Medal of Honor
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A Murderous Fight in the Dark

Captain Walter G. Morrill of the Twentieth Maine Infantry, won his Medal of Honor at the battle of Rappahannock Station, November 7, 1863.

The Confederate position at that point was skillfully chosen. It was a fortified semi-circle on the north bank of the Rappahannock, just above the point where the old Orange and Alexander Railroad crosses the river. The Confederate right of these entrenchments was at the bank of the river upon a sharp bluff, within a few yards of the railroad itself; thence following the crest of hills along the river these entrenchments swept off up-river until they again reached the bank of the water course a third of a mile further up. In front of the position, and on all sides, the ground was open for three-quarters of a mile, with absolutely nothing to cover the approach of troops. The main body of General Lee's army was immediately south of the Rappahannock; the third, Fifth and Sixth Corps of Meade's army approached the position from the north and east. Back of the Confederate entrenchments the river was too deep to ford, but the position was reached from the south bank by a pontoon bridge, where Confederate artillery was trained to sweep the approaches to the works, which were held by two brigades of General Jubal A. Early's Division.

The Union forces, across the open ground, were compelled to approach this position cautiously, and with skirmishers only. Over the vast plain down the river and below the railway, came the skirmish line of the Fifth Corps, those nearest the works of the enemy being men from the Twentieth Maine, commanded by Captain Morrill. They approached the right flank of the Confederate position. Directly in front of the works were skirmishers from the Sixth Corps, consisting of five companies of the Sixth Maine who joined their line at the railway. Slowly the Confederate skirmishers were pressed back until they were driven into the works, over a bare and bleak field. A road about 150 yards from the entrenchments was reached by the Sixth Maine, and under the cover of a shallow ditch a long halt was made. Captain Morrill advanced his men and kept in touch with the other troops at the railway. As darkness approached, the skirmish line of the Sixth Maine was doubled with the other five companies, and General D. A. Russell, commanding, sent word along the line thus formed that they were to assault and carry the enemy's works in front. The undertaking was perilous to the last degree, and impossible except in a wild transport of sublime heroism. There were no orders for Captain Morrill's men to join in this assault and share its perils and glory. Though it promised the destruction of all who engaged in it, Captain

Morrill could not see his comrades lead such a forlorn hope and not go with them. He explained the situation to his men and called for volunteers to support the "Old Sixth." About fifty responded and he held them in readiness for the advance when it came. In the flank of the enemy's works towards him, just across the railway and next to the river, was an open passage for a road. Captain Morrill with a quick eye and keen judgment, selected this weak point for attack.

When the dusk had deepened so that the real numbers of the assaulting line could not be seen by the Confederates, General Russell set his little force in motion and with his staff, joined in the terrible charge. The Sixth Maine's double line of skirmishers did not number three hundred, all told. But with a yell and a "tiger" which rent the skies and told of a force fourfold as large, they rushed to the fray. In an instant the works in their front were a sheet of solid flame; the air was hot with the hiss of Minie balls; grape and canister tore and decimated their lines; wilder and fiercer their yells rung upon the night as they rushed upon the foe. They reached the works however, and at points drove out brave men far more numerous than themselves; at other points they seemed swallowed up in the masses of their unfaltering adversaries. Gathering themselves together they kept up the fight in groups, but it seemed as if no human courage and valor could conquer the works they had reached. They began to sweep along the works at last and gained [illegible text] on the enemy's flank through the open roadway, no storm of lead and iron could turn them back. The enemy feared that a great force was hammering his flank and rear, and gave way, completing the confusion and defeat. Sweeping along the works he so gallantly helped to empty, Captain Morrill soon joined the "Old Sixth," and the entrenchments beyond the point where the pontoon bridge was laid were wrested from the enemy. This cut off their own retreat and brought new peril to the now greatly reduced Union force which had won unparalleled victory. Gathering themselves together in the upper portion of their works the Confederates by counter attack sought to open a way to the bridge. Minutes were as ages to the little band which repulsed these attacks and still held their ground. The Fifth Wisconsin came up to the support of the Sixth Maine, and then, – then victory was plucked from the "jaws of death and the mouth of hell."

Other forces then advanced and received the surrender of the penned up enemy with little further fighting. There were captured eight battle flags, four pieces of artillery and 1,600 men.

Citation

Morrill, Walter G.

Rank and organization: Captain, Company B, 20th Maine Infantry. Place and date: At Rappahannock Station, Va., 7 November 1863. Entered service at: Brownville, Maine. Birth: Brownville, Maine. Date of issue: 5 April 1898. Citation: Learning that an assault was to be made upon the enemy's works by other troops, this officer voluntarily joined the storming party with about 50 men of his regiment, and by his dash and gallantry rendered effective service in the assault.