

CIVIL WAR CONGRESSIONAL MEDAL OF HONOR

Early in the Civil War, a medal for individual valor was proposed to General-in-Chief of the Army Winfield Scott. But Scott felt medals smacked of European affectation and killed the idea.

The medal found support in the Navy; however, where it was felt recognition of courage in strife as needed. Public Resolution 82, containing a provision for a Navy medal of valor, was signed into law by President Abraham Lincoln on December 21, 1861. The medal 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.”

Shortly after this, a resolution similar in wording was introduced on behalf of the Army. Signed into law July 12, 1862, the measure provided for awarding a medal of honor “to such noncommissioned officers and privates as shall most distinguish themselves by their gallantry in action, and other soldier like qualities, during the present insurrection.”

Although it was created for the Civil War, Congress made the Medal of Honor a permanent decoration in 1863. 1,520 Medals were awarded during the Civil War, 1,195 to the Army, 308 to the Navy, 17 to the Marines and 4 to civilians. 25 Medals were awarded posthumously.

THE ORIGINAL MEDAL



The Navy’s Medal of Honor was the first approved and the first designed. The initial work was done by the Philadelphia Mint at the request of Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles. The mint submitted several designs for consideration, and the one prepared by the Philadelphia firm of William Wilson & Sons was the design selected.

The selected Medal of Honor design consisted of an inverted, 5 – pointed STAR. On each of the five points was a cluster of laurel leaves to represent victory, mixed with a cluster of oak to represent strength. Surrounding the encircle insignia were 34 stars, equal to the number of stars in the U.S. flag at the time...one star for each state of the Union including the 11 Confederate states.

Inside the circle of 34 stars were engraved two images. To the right is the image of Minerva, the Roman goddess of wisdom and war. On her helmet is perched an owl, representing wisdom. In keeping with the Roman tradition, her left hand holds a bundle of rods and an ax blade, symbolic of authority. The shield in her right hand is the shield of the Union of our states (similar to the shield on our seal and other important emblems.)

Recoiling from Minerva is a man clutching snakes in his hands, He represented discord and the insignia came to be known as “Minerva Repulsing Discord”. Taken in the context of the Civil War, soldiers and sailors struggling to overcome the discord of the states and preserve the Union, the design was as fitting as it was symbolic.

NAVY MEDAL OF HONOR (1862)

For all practical intents and purposes, the Navy Medal of honor remains the same today as it did when it was born. The only change has been in the attachment that connects it to the ribbon, and the ribbon itself. Originally the Navy Medal of Honor was suspended from its red, white and blue ribbon by an anchor wrapped with a length of rope. The reverse side of the Medal was inscribed with the words “Personal Valor” above an open area in which the recipient’s name could be engraved.

ARMY MEDAL OF HONOR (1862)

Struck from the same die as the Navy Medal of Honor, the original Army Medal differed only in the emblem that attached it to the same red, white and blue ribbon as the Navy. Replacing the anchor was an eagle perched on crossed cannon and clutching a saber in its talons. Replacing the words “Personal Valor” on the back of the Medal were the words “The Congress To” with an area to engrave the recipient’s name.



The First Medal of Honor Action **Bernard J. D. Irwin** **February 13-14, 1861**

Bernard J. D. Irwin was not thinking about medals that February morning in 1861...indeed there was no such thing for American soldiers. Instead the Army Surgeon’s mind was occupied with concern for a young Arizona Territory boy and a group of fellow soldiers. Days earlier, Cochise and a band of Apache warriors had captured the boy. The 7th Infantry’s 2nd Lt. George Bascom had immediately pursued with 60 men on a desperate rescue mission. Now word had reached Fort Breckenridge that the greatly superior Apache force had surrounded Bascom and his men and imperiled their own survival.



Accustomed to using his medical skills to save lives, Irwin was determined to now use his military skills to save his comrades. Unfortunately only 14 men could be spared from the garrison, these to be Irwin’s rescue party. No horses could be spared for the mission, so Irwin and his 14 soldiers departed Breckenridge on mules. Faced with a trek of 100 miles in the midst of a winter blizzard, the logistics of the mission were as improbable as the possibility of encountering the much larger enemy force, defeating them, and rescuing the captives. None-the-less, the Irish-born surgeon was determined to try.

“D-Day” came on February 13, 1861 when Irwin’s small rescue party encountered Cochise and his warriors at Apache Pass, Arizona. But it was not a battle so much as it was a tactical engagement. With a carefully laid out plan and maximum placement of his 14 men, Irwin succeeded in convincing the Indian warriors that he had arrived with a much larger force, causing them to withdraw. Bascom’s 60 men were liberated and joined Irwin and his 14 soldiers. The unified force then pursued Cochise into the mountains where they were able to engage him and rescue the captive boy.

Irwin’s heroic rescue occurred almost a year before the Medal of Honor was introduced to the U.S. Congress. Indeed, Irwin himself did not receive the Medal of Honor until January 24, 1894...more than 50 years later. But his actions the cold mornings of February 13-14, 1861 are recorded in history as the First Medal of Honor Action.