

John Vale

1835-1909



Born: 9 August 1835, Borough of Lambeth, London, England

Entered Service: 15 July 1861, Rochester, Minnesota

Branch: Co. H, 2nd Minnesota Infantry

Conflict: Civil War

Battle at Nolensville, Tennessee, 15 February 1863

Death: 4 February 1909, Davenport, Iowa

Submitted by
Marilyn Burbank
Rochester Chapter DAR

JOHN VALE

Few receive the Congressional Medal of Honor and even fewer live to receive it themselves. "Under the provisions of the Act of Congress approved 3 March 1863, the Medal of Honor is presented to officers and privates for their most distinguished gallantry in action." Following is the story of one such soldier, John Vale, who was inducted into the Civil War from Rochester, Minnesota, 22 June 1861.

EARLY YEARS

John was born in London, England, on 9 August 1835, the son of Thomas and Elizabeth Vale. John attended school until he was 13 years old, and then spent three and one-half years as clerk in a grocery store in Kensington. His father, Thomas, died in 1840. In November 1851 John decided to join his uncle, William Russell, in Davenport, Iowa. He sailed aboard the Lenobia which arrived in New York on 12 November 1851, and then traveled on to Iowa. As government land became available in the Minnesota Territory, John went west and began farming in Blue Earth County, Minnesota.

THE WAR YEARS

In July 1861, John joined Company H, 2nd Regiment, Minnesota Veteran Volunteer Infantry as a private and was inducted from Rochester, Minnesota. He served four years reaching the rank of Sergeant and was discharged 11 July 1865 in Louisville, Kentucky. Remarkably he was never wounded although he fought in the siege of Corinth and the battles of Chickamauga, Chattanooga, and Missionary Ridge. He also was with Sherman in the Atlanta campaign and March to the Sea, and from Savannah to Raleigh and Richmond.

He received the Medal of Honor for his bravery in the following battle as quoted from *The Story of a Regiment, Service of the 2nd Regiment, Minnesota Volunteer Infantry, 1861-1865*, By Judson W. Bishop, pages 1-6.

A MEDAL OF HONOR

"When the men of Company H awoke in the cold and gray Sunday morning of February 15, 1863, they found themselves camped on the farm of Colonel Battle of the 20th Confederate Tennessee, the regiment they had faced in the fight across the fence earlier at Mill Springs up in Kentucky. The closest town was Nolensville, about 12 miles from Nashville.

As the 14 men from the Blue Earth County reported to regiment headquarters, they found that Lieutenant Harrison Couse of Company C would be in charge of men to guard a group of ten wagons.

As Corporal Milton Hanna, one of the members of this little squad reported, "We received orders to go to the front to forage for mules, and started with ten teams. We marched south

along the turnpike about three miles from camp, on a crossroad known as Concord Church Road. Here a colored man informed us that just over the hill, about a half-mile away, near where the turnpike crossed over, the 6th Alabama Cavalry, SOD strong, had vamped the night before. After satisfying ourselves that this was true, we turned to the left on the mud road and went a mile east to a farmhouse.

"At this point, Sergeant (Livello) Holmes received orders from Lt. Couse to take 14 men and 4 wagons and go in a southwesterly direction to the foot near where the turnpike crossed over, and where the enemy was supposed to be, while he, with the rest of the company, should keep on east about three miles to another farmhouse to load the other six wagons. We could not understand why we were separated, as there was more forage at either place than the ten wagons could hold."

Corporal Hanna continued, "On reaching the farmhouse, located on a little hill with a small creek some eight or ten rods, we came to a lane leading from the house, running east and west, at the head of which were some barns, cribs, etc. arranged in the form of a letter V. The sergeant at once stationed sentinels at different points to prevent surprise, and John Vale" who stood at the foot of the hill, was soon hailed by a colored man coming on the run, and nearly out of breath, yelling 'See {em' see 'em! IIIThe enemy (was) west of the turnpike and had passed into the timber where we were unable to see them. They aimed to cut us off from our camp and the other foraging party. Sergeant Holmes ordered me to go to the crossroad and see what they were doing. While he returned to the cribs to prepare for defense, I placed myself in a cedar thicket a few rods from where the enemy crossed over the turnpike and could hear them talk and laugh as the horse's hoofs pattered over the road.

"I returned at once and reported, but the enemy had already arrived at the farm. They filed into the field following the same course we had taken, spreading out and making as large a showing as possible, giving us a chance to count them. They numbered 125, all mounted.

"Holmes saw they were coming to us first, and ordered us to get under cover as best as we could, and hold our fire until he shot first. "We can die,' said he, 'but we'll never surrender.'

"With these orders we took refuge in the buildings. I took shelter in the lower part of the barn. Holmes with two men, in the hay mow, the others in cribs, hog pens, and other out-buildings between the house and barn. When the enemy reached the head of the lane, they put spurs to their horses, each trying to be the first to catch a Yankee. On they came, across the creek, yelling: 'Surrender, you damned Yanks!' Moments seemed like hours as we sighted our rifles and waited for the signal gun.

"The advance was less than two rods from us, when three shots from the hay mow took down the leading horse, which fell on the rider and held him down during the fight, after which he was taken prisoner. Other shots quickly followed, killing eight horses and wounding several men. The others quickly dismounted and, running back, took shelter behind the fences. During

their confusion, we had time to reload our guns, and as some loaded quicker than others, we kept up a continuous fire until the enemy (was) driven away.

When the fight had continued for some time, I noticed a man sitting on his horse in a very dignified manner, who we afterwards learned was the captain in charge of the command. He was out of my range but I took careful aim and fired. As he did not heed my salute, I gave him two more charges of powder and ball. Those familiar with the old musket know that this meant at the end of my gun. He had occasion to dismount and lead his horse further back. I yelled that I had to do something on account of my shoulder. This, of course, was done in jest, and the other boys began yelling and asking why they didn't come and take the 'damned Yanks,' if they wanted us.

"The Confederates finally withdrew, and when the smoke had cleared away, we found two dead rebels, several wounded, and two dead horses. We took three prisoners and three horses who broke from their riders and came to us. Jim Flannigan was mounted on one of the captured horses and sent to camp, and Charles Kraus, on another, was dispatched to the remainder of the company, which was nowhere to be seen at that time.

"We finished loading our wagons, and prepared to return to camp. Our loss was Sergeant Holmes, Charles Liscomb, and Sam Loudon, slightly wounded, one mule killed and a wagon-tongue broken. We had three good horses to return to Uncle Sam for the dead mule." One of the two men sent back on a captured horse brought up the balance of the Second Minnesota. The Confederates, seeing them displayed as skirmishers, retreated when concerned that their unit might be outflanked. Ironically, the other rider was able to warn three Union officers, including his own brigade commander, Colonel Van Derveer, who was riding into the path of the retreating rebels. Van Derveer expressed his gratitude in Complimentary Orders published in the St. Paul Pioneer, 28 February 1863.

Sergeant Holmes was promoted to lieutenant and given an inscribed sword and officer's sash by the members of his company, and Brigadier General James B. Steedman presented him with an ivory-handled revolver. Even President Lincoln heard of the incident, and it was reported in the eastern newspapers.

What makes this event even more unusual was that in 1897 an administrative oversight was corrected. The following was addressed to Livilo N. Holmes, Esq., from the War Department:

Sir: You are hereby notified by direction of the President and under the provisions of the Act of Congress approved March 3, 1863, providing for the presentation of Medals of Honor to such officers, non-commissioned officers, and privates as have most distinguished themselves in action, a Congressional Medal of Honor has this day been presented to you for most distinguished gallantry in action.

Respectfully, R.A. Alger, Secretary of War

Out of this one incident, involving just one company, eight Congressional Medals of Honor were awarded to the known survivors, although all of the men in the action were entitled to them.

Livilo Holmes, William Clark, Milton Hanna, Samuel Wright, James Flannigan, John Vale, and Byron Pay were so honored. The eighth member was a fourteen-year-old boy who had lied that his age was eighteen. Young Joseph Burgher (later changed to Berger) went on to become, at age sixteen, the youngest captain in the Union army, later serving in the Minnesota state legislature. Among his offspring was a grandson from Rochester, Minnesota, who became Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, Warren Berger.

Not awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor because of death or unknown location were Homer Barnard, who died on February 28, 1864, Nelson Crandell, who died at Chattanooga on January 15, 1864, Charles Kraus, who was mortally wounded at Chattanooga; Louis Loudon, who died at St. Clair, Minnesota, after the war; Samuel Louden, who was killed at Missionary Ridge in November 25, 1863; Charles Liscom and Samuel Leslie" both unknown."

POST WAR YEARS

John returned to Minnesota but did not stay long. By 1870 he had moved to Scott County, Iowa, where he worked in the Davenport Post Office until his retirement. On 13 July 1881 he married Mary Middleton, daughter of J.N. and Mary Gilchrist Middleton. In 1888 he married Margaret Peters. Two children were born to them, Annie Francis and William John. In September 1897 the U.S. War Department awarded long overdue the Medal of Honor to him. Mr. Vale died 4 February 1909 and is buried in Oakdale Cemetery in Davenport.

Oakdale Cemetery, Davenport, Iowa



JOHN VALE
Documentation

The Story of a Regiment Service of the 2nd Regiment, Minnesota Veteran Volunteer Infantry, In the Civil War of 1861 to 1865, by Judson W. Bishop, pages 1-6

Minnesota in the Civil War and Indian Wars, page 141, published 1890

John Vale biography on Wikipedia

History of Scott County, Iowa, page 923, published 1882

The Davenport Daily Times, September 30, 1897, "Mr. Vale Honored, An Honor Deservedly Conferred by the War Department"

Davenport Sunday Democrat, September 19, 1897, page 1, "A Medal of Honor"

Davenport Democrat, February 5, 1909, obituary, "John Vale, Soldier and Good Citizen"