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Richard D. Dunphy: The Measure of Honor

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Abstract

On September 20, 2013, I had the pleasure of attending a town hall meeting at Gettysburg College featuring three members of Congressional Medal of Honor Society (CMOHS). Each had served our country with bravery and valor, each had gone above and beyond the call of duty, and each had earned the same medal as the man whose life I have been exploring for the past several months. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, Richard Dunphy, Medal of Honor, Battle of Mobile Bay, Union veterans

Disciplines

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Richard D. Dunphy: The Measure of Honor

NOVEMBER 8, 2013

By: Kevin Lavery, '16

On September 20, 2013, I had the pleasure of attending a town hall meeting at Gettysburg College featuring three members of Congressional Medal of Honor Society (CMOHS). Each had served our country with bravery and valor, each had gone above and beyond the call of duty, and each had earned the same medal as the man whose life I have been exploring for the past several months.

The first question from Chris Wallace, moderator of the event, asked the veterans about their service. In turn, each bearer of the medal humbly rejected the title of “hero.” To them, they had simply been doing their duty. These soldiers did not seek glory or commendation; they did as they were trained to do in order to protect those they fought with and fought for. Now retired, they act as advocates of the need for brave men and women to fight for freedom, liberty, and security.

Unlike them, Dunphy did not travel the country using his medal as a podium from which to speak about patriotism and service. 1,522 medals were issued during the Civil War, nearly half of the 3,462 medals issued in the award’s 150 year history. As there were no other medals of recognition at the time, the Medal of Honor was awarded for any and all acts of valor deemed deserving of an award. Therefore, the medal was more common and less revered by society, but it was nonetheless a meaningful award to those who earned it.

After completing my previous blog post, I contacted Joyce Giles of the Mare Island Historic Park Foundation and learned more about how Dunphy earned his medal. According to a letter from Admiral Farragut to Secretary Welles, Dunphy was not initially awarded the medal because he was not expected to survive his wounds. However, perhaps at Dunphy’s request, Farragut personally looked into the matter and adjudged the coalheaver’s sacrifice and gallant service to be deserving of merit. This, therefore, is the reason the medal was delayed which prompted Dunphy to contact Welles directly when it failed to arrive.

After the formal discussion at the CMOHS panel concluded, audience members were invited up to the stage to ask their own questions. One woman asked whether it would

be wise for the country to reinstitute a draft in order to spread the burden of national security more evenly across the U.S. citizenry. Interestingly, the panel disagreed with the suggestion. To them, it was important that men and women willingly elected to serve when possible, for their patriotism and willingness sets a tone of absolute devotion to the American cause. But during the Civil War—and in many conflicts since—this philosophy would have failed to bring enough soldiers to the field and so conscripted soldiers were called upon to strengthen the military.

Dunphy was one of these men. He enlisted in 1863 only after the draft laws were passed and perhaps only because of them. He was among twelve Hartford sailors who received medals at the Battle of Mobile Bay alone. Whereas the others who earned the medal that day each have a detailed citation of their service, Dunphy's simply reads that he "performed his duties with skill and courage," due to the after-the-fact nature of when his medal was awarded. A photograph of him in later life confirms that he did indeed – belatedly – receive his medal. And yet, neither his conscription nor his vague citation detracts from the value of Dunphy's service.

One of the final questions at the event was from a Gettysburg National Military Park ranger who asked if the panel had any relation to the soldiers who served at the Battle of Gettysburg. They looked at each other blankly until finally the eldest of them joked that he had fought on Cemetery Ridge and helped to repel Picket's Charge. But although they cannot claim to be of the blood of Civil War veterans, they are certainly part of the same brotherhood of gallantry as soldiers like Joshua Chamberlain, Daniel Sickles, Oliver Howard, and even Richard D. Dunphy.

Sources:

Congressional Medal of Honor Society, "Archive Statistics," available online at <http://www.cmozs.org/>.

Congressional Medal of Honor Society, "Dunphy, Richard D.," available online at <http://www.cmozs.org/>.

David Farragut to Gideon Welles, February 15, 1866, Mare Island Historic Park Foundation.

Richard D. Dunphy to Gideon Welles, February 6, 1866, GLCo8655, Gilder Lehrman Collection, Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, New York City.