

Double Honor: The Story of John and William Black and the Medal of Honor

David C. Hinze

When John and William Black marched away from the Chicago Board of Trade building on September 19, 1861, with the patriotic speeches still ringing in their ears, they most likely did not understand they were stepping off into history. Their regiment mustered into the service with great fanfare and patriotism along South Water Street. The newly minted 37th Illinois Infantry, or the Fremont Rifles, as some called the unit, deployed first to St. Louis and eventually into central Missouri to begin the process of becoming a fighting unit.¹

The Blacks served as officers in the 37th Illinois infantry. John, the eldest brother, was the regiment's major, and William was elected to a captain's position in Company K, known as the Vermillion County Zouaves. On the battle line William Black's company anchored the left flank. While the regiment, nearly one-thousand strong, marched through central Missouri, they received their first disappointment when they met General John C. Fremont, whose name was boldly emblazoned on their flag. The men became crestfallen when they learned the "Pathfinder" had been relieved of duty and was leaving the theater of operations. The 37th Illinois cased their colors and never flew the Fremont Rifles flag again.²

The Black brothers shared a special bond as they penetrated the Ozarks in late 1861 marching toward the Wire Road to rendezvous with General Samuel R. Curtis's Army of the Frontier who led a winter campaign across the desolate Ozark plateau. The brothers, born in Mississippi and Kentucky respectively, moved to Danville, Illinois, when their mother married a second time. The young men attended Wabash College in the Hoosier State when the guns of Fort Sumter interrupted their education. Both brothers initially enlisted in the 11th Indiana infantry, led by Colonel Lew Wallace, the future author of *Ben Hur*. John demonstrated charisma and solid management skills by rising from private to sergeant major of the unit. The Blacks gained a bit of combat experience in the Romney, West Virginia, Campaign during January 1862.³

John, or Charlie as his friends called him, wore his raven colored hair at shoulder length while a full mustache covered his upper lip. He stood six feet tall, while younger brother William stood just an inch shorter. William, or Willie as he was popularly known, had boyish good looks including a full head of black hair worn at what folks referred to as normal length. The regiment dreamed of the war on the East Coast, but now as winter blanketed the Ozark Plateau, the brothers discovered themselves marching toward the enemy in Springfield, Missouri. A few days later, on February 10, 1862, General Sterling Price, the commander of the pro-Southern Missouri State Guard, failed to contest the town of eight-hundred and the Blacks regiment filed into Springfield's main square. Perhaps as they pitched their tents they tasted the captured gingerbread and beer before bivouacking at the edge of town.⁴

Captain Black wrote home he was, "awed and inspired by the rugged terrain of the Ozarks" as their regiment pressed Price's State Guardsmen across the Arkansas-Missouri state line toward Fayetteville, Arkansas. According to Major Charlie Black the Missourian's retreated in disorder leaving behind, "broken wagons, (and) camp furniture as well as horses, mules and other equipage."⁵

In Richmond, Virginia, the southern command system reacted to the collapsing military situation in Arkansas by appointing General Earl Van Dorn, a West Pointer with solid cavalry skills but a rookie at handling infantry, to lead a counter attack against the Federals. His newly formed Army of the West consisted of sixteen-thousand soldiers, including Indians, Missouri State Guardsmen, and Confederate infantry and cavalry.⁶

Van Dorn ordered an immediate advance on the Federals who occupied a set of low hills along Little Sugar Creek and the Wire Road. The Federals, led by General Samuel R. Curtis, a West Point graduate, and his Army of the Southwest had heavily fortified Little Sugar Creek facing south. Curtis, a solid engineer and United States Congressman from Iowa, deployed his command of 10,500 soldiers, including the Black brothers and the 37th Illinois infantry on the intimidating heights. The Confederates scouted the Federal position and determined the Union defenses were too stout to assail. Van Dorn adopted a plan which called for a large turning movement to the west using the Bentonville Detour. This movement would place the Confederate army directly behind the Federals, severing their logistical lifeline with Rolla, Missouri, over two hundred miles away.⁷

As the southern army tried to execute the strategy, their difficulties quickly mounted as they proceeded to march through the cold night with sleet stinging against their faces, pecking at their summer uniforms and mounting protests from their empty stomachs. A lack of bridging equipment stalled the march for hours, and by sunrise on March 7 one-half of the Confederate army had failed to reach their objective around Pea Ridge, a large plateau in the region, where the two wings of the Confederate army planned to rendezvous. Due to the extremely slow march, General Ben McCulloch, a former Texas Ranger, decided to abandon his orders about following VanDorn's men around Pea Ridge. Several hours behind schedule, he realized he could never be in position for an early morning attack down the Telegraph Road as originally planned. At dawn, he chose to take a short cut on the Ford Road, across south face of Pea Ridge, to bring the pieces of the army together at Elkhorn Tavern. McCulloch believed the shortcut would place his command at a location ready to roll up the Union army from the rear, but he realized the gamble he was taking by exposing his force to possible attack while it remained strung out along the Ford Road.⁸

While McCulloch fretted, the Blacks remained focused on the campfires lighted by the Confederates across from Little Sugar Creek fooling the blue-clad army into believing a frontal attack was eminent on March 7, 1862. They slept warm and dry the previous night while the southerners suffered cold and hunger during their turning movement. The only complaint by Willie Black was, "A shortage of some rations," but he reported, "the men remained in high spirits."⁹

March 7 dawned gray and overcast. Reports concerning Confederate activity to the west filtered into Curtis's headquarters as he tried to grasp the fluid military situation unfolding around him. Wary of the intelligence being a ruse, he sent General Peter Osterhaus to investigate. The Prussian born graduate of The Berlin Military Academy gathered a mixed command and hurried to investigate the rumors over two miles to the northwest of the Federal line. At 11:30 a.m. Osterhaus stumbled upon Confederate troops north of Leetown, a little hamlet started by a relative of General Robert E. Lee. Without hesitation Osterhaus's command attacked the enemy cavalry stationed on the Ford Road scattering the Texas horse soldiers with two rounds of solid shot from their four, 12-pound James Rifles. But Osterhaus's small command could not withstand the withering

Confederate counterattack and the Federals organization vanished while they bolted headlong into the next field through Foster's Woods.¹⁰

Fortunately, Osterhaus had positioned the remainder of his units, the 36th Illinois infantry, the 4th Ohio battery, the 22nd Indiana infantry, and the 12th Missouri infantry along with the Missouri Independent battery behind the fence rails stretched across farmer Oberson's adjacent fallow fields. The shock of seeing the Federals ready for battle as the Texans pursued the fleeing Yankee units through a belt of woods separating the two fields caused the Confederate cavalry to rein in their mounts and scramble back into the safety of Foster's Woods before barely squeezing off a few rounds.¹¹

While the standoff began in Oberson's field the lead column of the McCulloch's wing, Hebert's southern infantry, stopped shuffling to the east along the Ford Road and redirected their trek to the sound of battle due south into Elizabeth Morgan's Woods. Tangled with thick underbrush, which obscured the Confederate's vision, the woodlot contained numerous downed trees due to a recent windstorm, and was cut east to west by deep ravines. With little to guide the four-thousand infantrymen from Louisiana and Arkansas, they pitched into the timber groping for the flank of the enemy in Oberson's field only by sound.¹²

While the Confederates main column tried to regroup and rally in Foster's woods, the Federals also rushed reinforcements to the sound of the guns. Colonel Jefferson C. Davis, an Indiana-born and a Mexican War veteran, commanded the Union 3rd Division. He roused the 37th Illinois, containing the Black brothers, the 59th Illinois infantry along with battery A, Second Illinois Light Artillery, also referred to as the "Peoria battery." When the unit's short march halted in Leetown, just behind the Osterhaus's line stretched across Oberson's Field, the Black brothers echoed the command for their men to strip off their packs and overcoats. They piled their personal items by a small opening in the trees and turned north on the Leetown Road. The regiment marched one-half mile when Colonel Julius White waved the men off the road crashing through the debris east into Morgan's Woods. Captain Willie Black aligned Company K, along the edge of woods with Oberson's fallow cornfield and a worm fence on his left, while the remainder of the regiment extended in a double line of battle. The 59th Illinois filed behind the Black brother's regiment marching deeper into the tangled morass on the unit's right flank, stepping over the downed logs

and fallen limbs. The Peoria Battery dropped the tails of their six guns on the frozen surface of Oberson's field and the gunners muscled their heavy muzzles into position until they pointed northeast into Morgan's Woods. They immediately began to bang away at the site of regimental colors dancing through the nearly bare trees marking the advance of Hebert's infantry.

The officers and men of both armies struggled to peer through the matted vines and brown underbrush at the ghost-like figures slowly coming into focus barely one-hundred yards away. As the Confederates came within twenty-five yards, one of the Federal officers barked the order, "to hold your fire," and it echoed along the two-deep battle line. Then someone shouted, "The enemy!" but another cried out, "no, they are our men!" The split-second hesitation by the men in blue gained the 37th Illinois a volley unloosed directly into their face by the men from Arkansas. The smoke from the muzzle blasts blanketed the woods making it difficult for Willie Black's men and their Colt Revolving Rifles to accurately determine their targets. Many of the men simply aimed their guns into trees and blazed away. The Colts, carried by Willie Blacks' Company K and along with Company A, created a distinctive "whirring" sound as the Illinoisans squeezed off their five rounds without reloading. The unique metallic melody created by the Colt Revolving rifles was often mentioned by the participants of both sides of the battle.¹³

For twenty minutes the two sides blazed away at each other. What began as a sudden volley soon became a maelstrom of lead. Slowly, the lines of the 37th Illinois began to waiver. Major Charlie Black screamed above the din for the men, "to rally on the colors," carried by Benjamin Manning, five separate times during the increasingly intense firefight. As the melee continued one of the men of the 37th remembered, "We couldn't see very much but smoke and flashes of fire."¹⁴

While the battle raged in Morgan's woods, a quiet stalemate settled across Oberson's field a mere forty yards to the west. General Ben McCulloch planned to move on Osterhaus with the bulk of his division. He personally rode forward to reconnoiter the Federal lines, but prior to the attack the 36th Illinois lay prone behind a grass-choked worm fence. McCulloch failed to see the unit as he personally led his own reconnaissance. The 36th Illinois infantry took aim and a volley emptied the saddle of the former Texas Ranger. General James McIntosh, the second in

command, was slain in the similar fashion minutes later. Leaderless, the Confederate troops on Foster's Farm lost their initiative and never advanced, despite their numerical superiority. General Louis Hebert, slugging it out in the woods next to Foster's farm, never grasped he had become the ranking commander on the field for the southerners nor did he comprehend his attack swirling through Morgan's Woods remained wholly unsupported.¹⁵

Intense fighting broke out directly in front of Willie Black's Company K, while Major Charlie Black ordered many of his company to get down because the volume of fire became so intense, if you remained standing, the chance of survival was slim. The 4th Arkansas attempted to advance south on the Leetown Road, located on the far right of Hebert's advance, but deadly case shot from the Peoria Battery ripped through the exposed ranks of the regiment as they scrambled back into the woods for cover. This caused a jumbled mess when they intermingled with the 3rd Louisiana already in line. This course of events brought two enemy regiments directly to bear upon Captain Willie Black's beleaguered company as they tried to hang on. Osterhaus dispatched a plea back to Curtis for more men to match the Confederate numbers.¹⁶

At headquarters, over two miles distant, Curtis was in a quandary. Under attack on two separate fronts, with the fight at Leetown and coupled with the sounds of cannons echoing from Elkhorn Tavern a mile to the east on the Telegraph Road, he tried to make decisions on which threat deserved his immediate attention. Sometime around 1:00 p.m. Curtis sensed the Leetown fight as the critical spot on the field and sent Davis with fourteen-hundred reinforcements to assist the 37th and 59th Illinois infantry.¹⁷

For over forty-five minutes the outnumbered Illinois regiments had held the line. A soldier in the 36th Illinois, in the field just to the west of the fighting, remarked, "Such a crackling of musketry I cannot describe it." Others referred to the continuous gunfire as a, "deep sullen roar." Casualties began trickling out of the woods to the rear. At 2 p.m. Davis committed his reserves to the fight sending in the 22nd and 18th Indiana into the contest on the right flank. The move came just in time. Where the lines of the two Illinois regiments met they began to crack and then crumble. White, their colonel, screamed for a right wheel out of the woods to protect

the Peoria battery, but under pressure he botched the orders causing the break in the center of his command. At this point, Charlie Black was the solo officer still on horseback, but at this crucial moment his right arm was mangled by a minnie ball. Although he refused to leave the field until ordered, the tactical situation began to unravel for the 37th Illinois.¹⁸

Luckily for the Federals the blinding smoke also caused terrible disorganization in Confederate lines. Coupled with the lack of sleep and hunger pangs from the all-night march, countless rebels dropped to the rocky soil totally exhausted. While the Federals disengaged, Hebert tried to realign his regiments for a final push. On his far right the 3rd Louisiana and 4th Arkansas used the lull in the action and the confusion of the 37th Illinois disjointed movements of their pull back for a surge toward the Peoria Battery situated in the southeast corner of Oberson's Field. Only a few handfuls of soldiers from Company K of the 37th Illinois remained stationed between the guns and the advancing rebels.¹⁹

Outnumbered, the small knot of Illinois men let loose a volley at the onrushing mass. The gunners of the Peoria battery edged away from their guns as they watched their infantry support evaporate. In the middle of the gray tide, someone advanced and made a solo stand one-hundred yards from the muzzles of the battery. All eyes were fixed on Captain Willie Black as he emerged from the choking, white smoke with a Colt Revolving Rifle in his hands. He aimed the gun and discharged its cylinder of ammunition into the faces of Hebert's men. This steadfast display of force stunned the attackers. Next, Black reached for his revolver and emptied its six chambers directly into the onrushing enemy that tried to sweep around him.²⁰

Private Samuel McKay of the 37th Illinois witnessed the fight, "I saw two rebel officers rush toward Capt. Black with drawn swords, and demand his surrender; but straightening his tall form to its full height, his eyes flashing fire, he struck the nearest with his sword and felled him to the earth and leaping over his prostrate form with the agility of a tiger, he struck the other full in the face with his already empty revolver, and he fell like a stone." Although two of the guns of the Peoria battery had to be abandoned, the other four were saved, in large part due to Captain Black's actions." Willie Black sank into a heap when two bullets spun him into the frozen roadbed. Black's description of his wound in a letter to his mother was more modest than heroic. He explained one of his wounds to his

mother as made by, "one bullet piercing my side, behind my left arm and flattening itself on my rib and transversing about four inches."²¹

Captain John Simpson of the 4th Arkansas led his men through the smoke, past Black's fallen form, and leaped upon one of the two cannons left behind by the men of the Illinois Battery A, Second Light Artillery just before he was shot down by the retreating 37th Illinois infantry. Men from Louisiana and Arkansas swarmed into the battery nearly precipitating the Union line to snap in two pieces on the Leetown Road. The four Federal remaining guns were being spirited away in a panic when suddenly the gunners stopped, wheeled, and showered the rebels with canister. The Confederate assault quickly played itself out. Exhausted and unsupported by the remainder of McCulloch's men, they quickly discovered themselves on the defensive and being pressed on both flanks. Slowly, the Confederates began to give up their hard won ground and the sight of fresh Federal units hurried them deeper into Morgan's bloody woods. There would be more brief savage episodes between units, but in the end General Hebert was captured and without effective leadership, McCulloch's wing of the army lost its fighting capability.²²

The 37th Illinois entered Morgan's woods 450 strong. They lost 21 killed and 121 wounded in the heated, forty-five minute firefight. Major Charlie Black and Captain Willie Black were counted among the seriously wounded. Both men writing home a few days later agreed their convalescence would be long, although they down-played their wounds to their family. For his courageous stand in front of the Peoria Battery Captain William Black was recommended for the Medal of Honor, which he received on October 2, 1892. The baptism of fire cost the 37th Illinois 31 percent casualties.²³

The Illinoisans bivouacked at Camp Stephens, a few miles away from the Leetown fight, to avoid the post battle stench and begin the healing process for the wounded. Willie Black tackled his paper work. He reported Company K lost eight Colt Revolving rifles when they retreated from the woods. The news of battle brought doctors from Vermillion County, Illinois, to attend the wounded and assist the army's overworked surgeons. Dr. Fifthian, the Blacks' stepfather, responded to the call to treat the wounded, including his two boys. Thirty-one days after the battle ended the Illinois boys marched north on the Wire Road to Cassville, Missouri, to begin a new, ugly phase of the war fighting guerilla bands.²⁴

Organized war in the region ended with the Union victory at Pea Ridge. The 37th Illinois remained unfit to transfer to a new theater of operations because they suffered significant casualties and were lacking their two top officers. The new type of combat became dreadful work. The regiment grew frustrated trying to catch bushwhackers on horseback while they chased the guerillas on foot. Major Charlie Black appealed to General Curtis to be relieved from the disagreeable work, but the transfer was denied. Captain Willie Black wrote he, "was bored" and jested in a letter home how Cassville, Missouri, provided him an, "unsuccessful social life." Following Colonel White's promotion to brigadier general political strife rocked the regiment. Major Charlie Black and Lieutenant Colonel Myron Brown grappled for control of the regiment. This drama continued to play out as the regiment marched back to Springfield, Missouri.²⁵

The small village had grown from eight-hundred to twelve-hundred people when the regiment arrived for their second visit. Eventually, while stationed at Springfield, the unit became part of General Francis Heron's command and they were brigaded with the 20th Iowa infantry. Hard marching in pursuit of the enemy accounted for the Black brothers' primary activity in the Ozarks following their Pea Ridge victory. The daily, persistent pounding, on the hilly, rocky roads changed the nick name of the unit from Fremont's Rifles to "The Illinois Greyhounds."²⁶

While the Greyhounds chased irregulars through the Missouri countryside, it appeared to the Blacks that they would never get away from this disagreeable duty. Slowly, the military situation in the region changed dramatically. Aggressive commandeers on both sides assumed control and decided to change the status quo, challenging the Federals' line of defense stretching across northwest Arkansas. Thoroughly discouraged, the Blacks finally received some good news. They celebrated Charlie's victory in the tussle over command of the regiment in November of 1862 and older brother began to learn the lessons of leadership.²⁷

Before the roads turned into quagmires from the winter rains and snow, the Greyhounds abruptly received a command to march to the relief of General James Blunt an aggressive, stocky Kansan. On December 3, now Lieutenant Colonel Charlie Black gave the order to cook three days rations under a cold, starlit sky and commenced a march southward along the Wire Road. The Federal lines stretched across southern Missouri and northwest

Arkansas had become separated and Blunt's army at Cane Hill, Arkansas, had become isolated. The two wings of the Union Army of the Frontier discovered themselves over one-hundred miles apart due to Blunt's aggressive behavior and now the Kansan's feared an attack upon his isolated, small command near the Boston mountains. The Greyhounds rapidly commenced one of the most amazing marches of the war to rescue Blunt's soldiers.²⁸

They stepped off and set a blistering pace covering 112 miles in the next three days. The unit collapsed just outside of Fayetteville, Arkansas. The last fifty-one miles, made throughout the day and night on December 6 and 7 were covered in an astonishing thirty-one hours. The unit eventually neared the white-washed building known locally as the Prairie Grove Church, located twenty miles west of Fayetteville, Arkansas, the racket of gunfire quickened the step of the weary Greyhounds toward the Illinois River. They splashed across the waist-deep, icy stream and came into line on the right flank not knowing what opposition they faced. They aligned on flat ground, in waist high brush, facing a large wooded hill crowned with the two-story Borden farmhouse with a large barn standing to the left of the home.²⁹

The Greyhound's leader, General James Herron, a tough Iowan and Pea Ridge Medal of Honor winner, believed he had struck a blocking force, chiefly cavalry, designed to keep the two wings of the Army of the Frontier from uniting with General Blunt at Cane Hill. The real situation was quite different. What Herron's small command, including the Black brothers and the 37th Illinois, faced was the entire Confederate army hoping to destroy them and then defeat the remainder of the Federals led by Blunt, at a time of their choosing.³⁰

Believing the Confederate numbers manageable on top of the Borden's Hill, Herron chose to send in his six brigades, two at a time, in piece meal fashion. While both sides prepared, Charlie and Willie Black endured an artillery duel between the long guns of both sides until the gunners in blue, with their rifled pieces, silenced the out matched southern gunners on the forested hilltop. When the smoke from the guns drifted away, sometime around 1:30 p.m., with the 19th Iowa on the left and 20th Wisconsin to their right, the Midwesterners stepped out magnificently guiding toward the house scaling the hillside. In the apple orchard behind

the Borden house and ravine to the west of the home, the blue-clad troops walked into a death trap. Shocked by the far superior numbers, they discovered the bullets flying from several directions as the two brigades were cut to pieces and stumbled down the hillside with hundreds of screaming, victorious southerners following the panicked Federals. Only the line of Union artillery in the valley checked the Confederates as they scrambled back to the top of the ridge.³¹

Hundreds of dead and dying lay in heaps spread across the fields. Sometime past 2 p.m. the 37th Illinois rose with a cheer when Colonel Huston, leading the 3rd Division, called for the Greyhounds and the inexperienced 26th Indiana to make the next assault. Painfully undermanned due to the swift march, the Greyhounds only mustered 450 men for their attack and the Hoosiers a mere four-hundred. The soldiers aligned themselves in the valley below the Borden farmstead and marched in common time toward the ridgeline across open ground, and eventually on the on the double-quick, following the Stars and Stripes. At the foot of the hill the regiment halted and shook out two companies of skirmishers. Lieutenant Colonel Black, in command of the assault, pushed forward A and I companies as skirmishers to prevent an ambush at the top of the hill from Confederates located in the Borden house and barn. Quickly the entire unit pushed forward up the steep ridge. A sergeant in the 26th Indiana, Ezra Borden, recalled Black as an impressive figure while, "riding back and forth urging his men forward. His long hair, dropping down to his shoulders, gave him a rather particular grand appearance." Another soldier remembered Black, "with his shoulder-length hair, navy cloak with its scarlet lining and his black steed," and thought him to be an ideal picture of a soldier.³²

Behind the home was an expansive apple orchard with the bare branches waving in the breeze. Hidden in tall grass, the Confederates crouched behind the split rail fences along southern and western boundaries of the Borden's apple orchard. The men of the 37th marched directly into heart General Fagan's Confederates, part of General Francis Shoup's division. With the additional Confederate units poised nearby, the two undersized Union regiments of less than one-thousand men faced several thousand battled hardened troops. Black's unit became separated from the 26th Indiana as they advanced east of the Borden house guiding with the barn on its left.³³

do what you can. I am shot all to pieces and must go." Black left to seek medical attention while Frisbee continued to rally the men.³⁹

The situation appeared bleak for the 37th Illinois and Herron's command, but at 3:00 p.m., just when the situation appeared desperate for the Greyhounds, two cannon boomed across the prairie announcing Blunt's arrival. The remainder of the fighting occurred on the far right, away from the decimated Greyhounds. The casualty list for the Greyhound's twenty-minute slug fest in the orchard was 8 dead and 157 wounded, or 18 percent of the unit. The power of the five shot Colt's on each flank probably reduced the casualties significantly by evening the contest a bit with their added fire power.⁴⁰

Lieutenant Colonel Charlie Black had taken his men to hell and back. They lasted longer in the Borden orchard than any of the other four Federal units engaged. Black had his arm treated by surgeon Benoni O. Reynolds of the 3rd Wisconsin Cavalry. He examined the mangled limb and chose to resection the arm instead of performing an amputation, a challenging and difficult procedure in 1862, especially on the battlefield. This tricky procedure involved removing several inches of the bone and rejoining the undamaged pieces. Remarkably, Charlie Black survived the operation and the severe wounding. For his leadership ability in handling the Greyhounds with skill and courage, under great duress, he was awarded the only Medal of Honor at the Battle of Prairie Grove.⁴¹

Willie and Charlie Black survived the war and returned home following the conflict. The brothers returned to college and earned law degrees. Willie became embroiled in another conflict when he defended the anarchists in the Chicago Haymaker's Riot in 1886 that was part of the labor union struggle of the post-war era. A leading attorney in Chicago, he died in 1916. Charlie held numerous political posts in several presidential administrations. He proudly served as president of the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) in 1896, a United States Congressman, as well as the chief prosecutor for Chicago, Illinois. He died in 1915.

The Black brothers are one of six sets of brothers to win the Medal of Honor in our nation's history; four of these "double honors" were earned during the Civil War. These two brothers exhibited great courage under fire, personally placing themselves in the line of fire, and they, "distinguished themselves by their gallantry in action." Throughout our history 3,465 have

displayed the heroism necessary to win the Medal of Honor. The Civil War was the birth place of our nation's highest military award, but the standards and procedures for earning the award varied, and in some cases the criteria did not match today's standards. It took a while to sort out the type of deeds the Medal tried to honor. Eventually, a panel led an official review of those holding the medal and the standards for receiving the honor in the future. With new rules in place not all who expected to receive a Medal of Honor met the new standards. Those who met the new criteria received the commendation for meritorious contributions to their nation.⁴²

Consideration for the Medal of Honor by infantrymen only began in 1862. Because of government red tape, the changing standards and an awkward procedure for nominations, many medals were not received until much later in life as the Blacks did in 1892. Once the significance of the Medal became clear, the men in the ranks and the nation's citizens embraced the concept of the sacrifice and the actions of its heroes.

The Blacks and their battlefield heroics have faded into our national mosaic. In 1862, at great personal risk, these citizen soldiers more than answered their country's call. Despite the delay and confusion in receiving the award, it remains apparent Willie and Charlie Black earned their medals in heroic combat. In retrospect, the Blacks would feel comfortable with the other winners of our country's highest military honor across the years. The Black brothers truly earned their double honor and set a high standard for those who would follow their exploits.

Notes

1 Michael A. Mullins, *The Fremont Rifles: A History of the 37th Illinois Volunteer Infantry*. (Wilmington, N.C., Broadfoot Publishing Co., 1990), p. 9.

2 Mullins, *The Fremont Rifles*, pp. 18-19.

3 Michael E. Banasik, *Duty, Honor and Country: The Civil War Experience of Captain William P. Black, Thirty-Seventh Illinois Infantry*, (Iowa City, IA, Camp Pope Book Store, 2006), p. 21.

4 Banasik, *Duty, Honor and Country*, (Iowa City, IA, 2006), p. 22.

5 Ibid, p. 23.

6 William L. Shea and Earl J. Hess, *Pea Ridge: Civil War Campaign in the W.*, Osterhaus to Curtis, 14 March 1862, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*. 70 Vols. Washington D.C., 1881-1890. Hereinafter cited as *OR*, Series 1, Vol. VIII, p. 218. *est*, (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Publishing,

The Greyhounds regrouped and advanced into the apple orchard. Suddenly the orchard exploded with a deafening roar and flying lead. In the regiment's front, two Confederate units let loose a volley into the faces of the Federals. The right flank contended with three southern regiments, several ranks deep, who stood up and poured a steady crossfire into the stunned Greyhounds. Company A smartly advanced on the right of the 37th and tried to stave off the rebels with their fifty Colt Revolving rifles, but the weight of eight-hundred southern gun barrels began to collapse the right flank as the unit edged deeper into the orchard. Lieutenant Colonel Black refused his right while the remainder of the unit pushed forward, sliding to the left, behind the melee. The Greyhounds' left flank halted and responded with three quick volleys from their Colt's into the packed fence rails surrounding the orchard. Bark chipped off the old apple trees and fence rails in large pieces, but they provided little cover for the men.³⁴

Slowly the 26th Indiana, to the left of the Greyhounds, and in their first combat action, began to fall in heaps of, "slain and wounded." For every volley the Hoosiers fired, the Missourians and Arkansans fired three, with their shotguns and revolvers doing severe damage at close range. Slowly, the 26th Indiana disintegrated and melted toward the rear. Private Robert Braden remembered, "As soon as we entered the orchard the bullets flew like hail. Hardly a man was not touched on their body or clothing, I was one of three in my company not wounded." On Captain Willie Black's left flank one of the participants complained, "The orchard became a howling hell. Every man became a firing fiend, firing as fast as he could, planting a bullet where it would do the most good." The left of the Greyhound's line remained staunchly planted despite a galling fire pouring in from two sides.³⁵

The right side of Lieutenant Colonel Black's line buckled first when it was attacked by screaming men in gray uniforms and the exchange of gunfire quickly turned into a hand to hand brawl. After ten minutes Black appeared through the smoke and disengaged his right back a few yards and rallied the survivors. Slowly, the sheer weight of numbers and musket barrels wore down the 37th Illinois, and after ten agonizing minutes, Black called the unit back to a fence line directly in front of the farm house where he steadfastly rallied the survivors. Acrid smoke from burnt black powder coupled with the stench of blood in the crisp, cold air where it pooled on the

orchard grass and flecked the faces of the 37th filled the nostrils of the Greyhound remnants. A Confederate Lieutenant, M.C. Duke, boldly led a charge on the Greyhounds and Charlie Black screamed above the din for the volley which cut down the officer and heaped more wounded onto the Borden's front lawn.³⁶

Black, still on horseback in the swirling melee, quickly examined his options. He received information regarding Marshall's Arkansas battery rolling into place on his right flank. He understood the dreadful carnage the four guns would do when they began belching canister enfilading his small command. The fence in front of the unit, while providing a good rallying point, would disorganize his men if he ordered a bayonet attack and staying meant sure death. With no good options remaining, Black called for the Greyhounds to retreat down the slope already covered with writhing figures from both armies.³⁷

The retreat, without warning, became a personal nightmare for Charlie Black. While disengaging his regiment, a mine ball smashed Black's left upper arm in quick succession, snapping the bone in two places. This created a serious challenge because he rode into battle with his right arm still in a sling and in extreme pain from the unhealed wound at Pea Ridge just nine months prior to Prairie Grove. Unable to control his mount, the retreat became more disorganized than Black desired. Stumbling down the slope he met Colonel Huston who rebuked him by calling out, "Good God Colonel Black, can't you do something to stop this." He replied, "Colonel my arm is all broke to pieces and I cannot hold my horse." Huston softened his voice and ordered Black to, "Go at once to the rear if you are wounded." Despite the confusion the Greyhounds rallied when they neared the Union artillery in the valley. The Union artillery's first salvo seemed to, "lift up the Confederate line into the air and blow them back into the forest." Men who had just shattered the 37th Illinois and thought victory at hand now found themselves knocked down by squads and searching for the relative safety back at the top of the hill near the Borden home. They left behind over one-hundred gray-clad dead and wounded for their brief foray trying to finish the Illinoisans and the Hoosiers. Colonel Black steadfastly refused to go to the rear until he stabilized his line.³⁸

Satisfied the Greyhounds were secure, he sought out Major Frisbee, second in command, and begged him, "for God sakes take command and

- 1992), p. 96; Allison W. Sparks, *The War between the States As I Saw It, Reminiscent, Historical and Personal*, Tyler, (Texas, 1901), p. 174. ; Barron, Samuel B. *The Lone Star Defenders: A Chronicle of the Third Texas Cavalry, Ross' Brigade*, (New York, 1908), pp. 56-61.
- 7 Shea and Hess, *Pea Ridge*, p. 86. OR, Series 1, Vol. VIII, p. 283.
- 8 Shea and Hess, *Pea Ridge*, p. 97-99; Sparks, *War Between the States*, p. 174; Barron, *Lone Star Defenders*, p. 67.
- 9 Osterhaus to Curtis, 14 March 1862, OR, Series 1, Vol. VIII, p. 218,; Peter J. Osterhaus, *What I Saw in the War*, Belleville Public Library Manuscript Room.
- 10 Sparks, *War Between the States*, p. 174; Barron, *Lone Star Defenders*, p. 67.
- 11 Osterhaus to Curtis, 14 March 1862, OR, Series 1, Vol. VIII, p. 218.
- 12 Barron, *Lone Star Defenders*, p. 68.
- 13 Mullins, *The Fremont Rifles*, pp. 66-67; Samuel Colt invented the Colt Revolving Rifle using his Colt's pistol famous five chambered cylinder incorporated into a rifle stock. Although the new weapon could fire five shots rapidly without reloading it did have a drawback. Sometimes all the ammunition in the cylinder would fire at one time and wound the user. Nearly all users of the revolving rifle exchanged the weapon for a more reliable multi-shot option at the end of 1863. It appears about 200 Colt Revolving Rifles were issued to the 37th Illinois in 1862. See in Francis Lord, *The Civil War Collector's Encyclopedia*, 4 vols., (Harrisburg: The Stackpole Company, (Vols. 1 & 2.) West Columbia, South Carolina: Lord Americana Research Inc. (vols. 3 & 4), 1975-1984), pp. 249-51.
- 14 Mullins, *The Fremont Rifles*, pp. 66-67.
- 15 Sparks, *War Between the States*, p. 174.
- 16 Mullins, *The Fremont Rifles*, pp. 68-69; White to J. C. Davis, OR, Series 1, Vol. VIII, p. 191.
- 17 Mullins, *The Fremont Rifles*, pp. 66-67; J. C. Davis to T. I. McKenny, OR Series 1, Vol. VIII, p. 183.
- 18 J. C. Davis to T. I. McKenny, OR Series 1, Vol. VIII, p. 183.
- 19 Walter L. Brown, "Pea Ridge: Gettysburg of the West," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, (Spring 1956), pp. 3-7; Albert Castel, "A New View of the Battle of Pea Ridge," *Missouri Historical Review*, 17 (January 1968), pp. 136-37.
- 20 Wiley Britton, *Civil War on the Border 1861-1862*, New York, G. P. Putnam & Sons, 1891, p. 203.
- 21 Capt. W. P. Black, *Camp Stephens*, letter to mother, W. P. Black Correspondence, Illinois State Historical Library Collection.
- 22 John C. Black Papers, 1856-1866. John C. Black and Family Collection, Illinois State Historical Library, Springfield, Ill.
- 23 White to J. C. Davis, OR, Series 1, Vol. VIII, p. 191; Mullins, *The Fremont Rifles*, p. 73; Col. White's report on Casualties at Pea Ridge, March, 1862 to the Adjutant General. Adjutant General Records, Microfilm Roll No. 29.
- 24 Abstract of Material Consumed by Company K, 1st Quarter 1862, and List of Equipage Lost at Pea Ridge, March 1862; William P. Black Papers, 1856-1869. John C. Black and Family Collection, Illinois State Historical Library, Springfield, Ill.
- 25 Maj. J. C. Black, Cassville, 25 April 1862, letter to Maj. Gen. Curtis, John C. Black and Family Collection, Illinois State Historical Library, Springfield, Ill.
- 26 Mullins, *The Fremont Rifles*, pp. 109-14; Brig. Gen., J. White, Chicago, 8 July 1862;

- Letter to A. C. Fuller, Adj.-Gen. and Capt. H. Frisbee. Springfield, MO, 11 July 1862, Letter to A. C. Fuller Adj. Gen., Adjutant General Records, Microfilm Roll 29; Col. J. White, Chicago, 9 July 1862 Letter to Maj. John C. Black, John C. Black Correspondence, Illinois State Library. Springfield, Ill.
- 27 Mullins, *The Fremont Rifles*, pp. 109-14; Brig. Gen., J. White, Chicago, 8 July 1862; Letter to A. C. Fuller, Adj.- Gen. and Capt. H. Frisbee. Springfield, MO, 11 July 1862, Letter to A. C. Fuller Adj. Gen., Adjutant General Records, Microfilm Roll 29.
- 28 Brig. Gen. E.B. Payne, "Prairie Grove," No. 52, *District of Columbia Commandery M.O.L.L.U.S.* (Washington, 1904), pp. 5-6; Lt. Henry C. Adams, "Battle of Prairie Grove," No. 32, *Indiana Commandery M.O.L.L.U.S.* (Indianapolis, 1898), pp. 99-100.
- 29 Mullins, *The Fremont Rifles*, pp. 151-53.
- 30 Mark Boatner, *Civil War Dictionary*, New York, David McKay Company, Inc. 1959. p. 329.
- 31 OR, Series 1, Vol. 22, pp. 137-38.
- 32 OR, Series 1, Vol. 22, p. 118; Shoup's Report on Prairie Grove, 11 December 1862; William Black Letters, 9 December 1862, Springfield State Historical Society.; Adams, "Battle of Prairie Grove," p. 458.
- 33 "From Co. A. 37th Ill," Rock Island Weekly Union, 7 January 1863.
- 34 Payne, "Prairie Grove," p. 13; Walker, "Battle of Prairie Grove," p. 358.
- 35 Ibid., p. 13.
- 36 Walker, "Battle of Prairie Grove," p. 358.
- 37 OR, Series 1, vol. 22, p. 118; Charles Black Letters, 7 December 1862; Payne, "Prairie Grove," p.14.
- 38 George E. Griffith, "At Prairie Grove," National Tribune, December 18, 1862; William Black Letters, 9 December 1862; OR, Series 1, Vol. 22, p. 109; Recollections of Genl. H. N. Frisbee, N. Orleans. La., of Events and Incidents Connected with 37th Ills. Inf. Vol. 4.
- 39 OR, Series 1, Vol. 22, p. 119; Britton, *War on the Border*, p. 417; Capt. William P. Black Letters, Prairie Grove, 10 December 1862; *The Congressional Medal of Honor, The Names, The Deeds*, Forest Ranch, 1984, p. 720.
- 40 Ibid., p. 722.
- 41 Banasik, *Duty, Honor, Country*, p. 441. *The Congressional Medal of Honor, The Names, The Deeds*, Forest Ranch, 1984, p. 720.
- 42 Ibid., p. 24.