

John C. Black

Biography of a Medal of Honor winner from Illinois.
by Bill McFarland



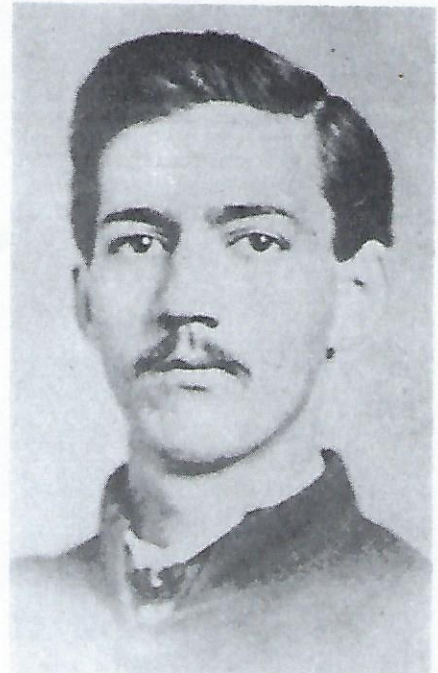
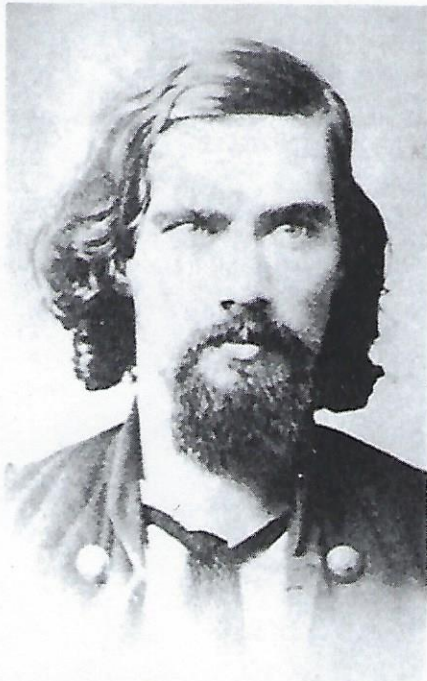
Tintypes of John C. Black now in the collection of the author. The sixth-plate at left shows Black as Sergeant-Major of the 11th Indiana Infantry in the period April-July 1861. The quarter-plate at right depicts Black as Major of the 37th Illinois, sometime between August 1861 and November 1862. The gray zouave uniform is the first type issued to the 11th Indiana. For a view of the second type, issued in December 1861, see MI, v. VII, #2, p. 27.

"Should I wait while a glorious train of heroes swept past me to battle for the right and defend what I so highly praised? Never!" With that thought John C. Black, a student at Wabash College in Indiana, answered President Lincoln's first call for troops following the bombardment of Fort Sumter. Although his family lived in Danville, Illinois, Black did not return home but enlisted immediately in the 11th Indiana Volunteer Infantry, a unit better known as the Indiana Zouaves.

John Charles Black was born on 27 January 1839 in Lexington, Mississippi. He was the oldest of four children born to John Black, a Presbyterian minister, and Josephine Culbertson Black. Both parents were originally from Pennsylvania. The elder Black had taken his family south after entering the ministry and had returned to Pennsylvania about a year prior to his death in 1847. That same year his widow moved west with her four children, joining her brother in Danville, Illinois. In 1850, Mrs. Black married Dr. William Fithian.

Dr. Fithian was a prominent citizen of Danville and had been elected to the Illinois house of representatives in 1834, the same year Abe Lincoln was elected to that body. That association was the beginning of thirty years of friendship between the two men. As a circuit lawyer Lincoln often visited Danville and frequently was a guest in the Fithian home. On 21 September 1858, after debating Stephen Douglas at Charleston, Illinois, Mr. Lincoln stayed at the Fithian home and spoke from the balcony of the house. In this atmosphere John C. Black spent his teenage years.

In 1858, at the age of nineteen, Black entered Wabash College in Indiana, where, in addition to his studies, he became a lieutenant in the college cadet company. In 1860 his younger brother William entered the college and also joined the cadet company. The day after the news of the attack on Fort Sumter, the Black brothers and forty other cadets enlisted in the "Montgomery Guards" in nearby Crawfordsville. The Guards were mustered in for three



Two views of John C. Black held by the Illinois State Historical Library. That at left shows him as a full colonel sometime after the battle of Prairie Grove, December 1862. The center photo is undated.

John's brother, Captain William P. Black, Company K, 37th Illinois.

months service on 25 April and soon became Company I of the 11th Indiana Infantry, commanded by Colonel Lew Wallace. Shortly thereafter, John Black was promoted to sergeant-major of the regiment, while his brother William became a corporal in Company I. In their three months of service the Zouaves saw duty and limited action in Maryland and western Virginia. When the regiment mustered out on 4 August 1861, Black returned to his hometown to recruit a company for three years service.

THE SEARCH FOR JOHN BLACK

My research on John C. Black began in 1983 when I purchased two tintypes said to be images of "Jacob Black of the Illinois Greyhounds," who had been killed during the Civil War. I also was told that Jacob Black was personally acquainted with Lincoln and was the brother of General John Black.

Research on the mythical Jacob led nowhere, so I turned to General John Black and soon suspected that my tintypes were of the General and not Jacob. I found that John had served in the Indiana Zouaves; this information matched the uniform in one of the tintypes. The other image seemed to fit with Black's service in the 37th.

Photos of Black obtained from the Vermilion County Museum looked very much like the tintypes in my possession. Final proof surfaced in the photo collection of the Illinois State Historical Library, where a water color of John Black and his brother William, as members of the 11th Indiana, showed John in an identical pose and wearing the same uniform as the zouave in my tintype. Once the tintypes were identified, I wrote Black's story, which is based largely on Black's personal and family papers in the Illinois State Historical Library and on his pension records.

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This company of young men from the Danville area became Company K of the 37th Illinois Infantry. John became the major of the regiment. Brother William, now a

captain, led Company K, with his stepbrother, William Henry Fithian, as lieutenant. The 37th Illinois originally titled itself "The Fremont Rifles" but later became known as "The Illinois Greyhounds"—a name reflecting the regiment's marching ability. Some companies were armed with Springfield muskets, others with Colt revolving rifles. Doctor Fithian sent each of his sons two revolvers. For the next year the Greyhounds participated in numerous marches and skirmishes in southwestern Missouri.

In the winter of 1861 Lieutenant Fithian suffered from a severe bout with typhoid. He did not recover his health, and resigned from the service in March 1862.

The battle of Pea Ridge, Arkansas in early March 1862 was the first real battle for the 37th Illinois. They were involved in some of the heaviest fighting of the battle, and performed reasonably well, coming away with a captured rebel flag. Major Black rode up and down the line of the regiment's left wing, encouraging the men to "stand firm and never quit the flag." Early in the engagement a button on Black's coat stopped a ball and thus saved his life. Later, as the regiment began to falter, Black's horse was killed and the Major was pinned beneath it. William Black, seeing his brother's predicament, turned to rescue him from a gray wave of advancing rebels. William picked up a Colt rifle and fired its five rounds into the mass of Confederates, then helped his brother from the open field to rally with the rest of the regiment. For this action William Black received the Medal of Honor.

The Black brothers were not to escape the battle uninjured, however. Near the end of the fighting on 7 March, while rallying the 37th Illinois for the fifth time, John Black was wounded in the right forearm, three inches below the elbow. The ball passed between the bones, injuring both, and exited the other side, lodging in his sleeve. Black remained on the field through the critical period of the battle until he was ordered to report to the surgeon by his brigade commander, Col. Julius White.

William Black also was hit by a ball piercing his side behind his left arm, but the wound was not serious and he

stayed with his company. As the battle ended in a Union victory, the 37th Illinois counted 21 men killed and 114 wounded in its ranks. It was reported that several of the dead had been scalped by Indians.

John Black's wound required a six week convalescence. During this period he was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel of the regiment. Returning to duty with his arm in a sling, he joined the unit in time for the battle of Prairie Grove, Arkansas.

The Greyhounds truly earned their nickname marching south from Missouri. In the three days preceding the battle they covered 112 miles.

Initially supporting a battery, the 37th soon was ordered forward to storm a position on the Confederate right where two previous attempts had failed. The regiment charged up a steep hill against an enemy firing from behind obstacles of brush and logs. John Black, with his injured right arm still in a sling, was on horseback at the front of the regiment. He was hit almost immediately. This time he was struck in the left arm, the ball shattering the bone above the elbow. Nonetheless he stayed at his post. The 37th pressed forward despite heavy losses, overran and spiked a battery of three guns, captured a Confederate flag, and recovered the colors of the 20th Wisconsin which had been lost in a previous assault.

Forced back by a rebel counterattack, the 37th rallied at the foot of the hill and drove the enemy back in turn. At this point Lt. Col. Black turned over the regiment to Major Frisbie and was taken to a field hospital. When the surgeons were done with him he still had his left arm but it was two inches shorter than the right.

For his actions at Prairie Grove, John C. Black was promoted to Colonel and awarded the Medal of Honor. The unique situation of brothers receiving the Medal of Honor

is shared by only two others, George and Thomas Custer.

Three months after Prairie Grove, Black returned to duty with the 37th in time for the siege of Vicksburg. Thereafter Black and the 37th saw action in Texas, Florida, and the Red River campaign in Louisiana.

Many of the Greyhounds reenlisted in 1864, and the 37th retained its colors as a veteran regiment. Captain William Black, however, was one of those who chose not to reenlist, and he was mustered out on 29 September 1864. He worked for the Provost Marshal's office in Danville until the end of the war, then moved to Chicago, where he studied law and opened a practice.

At the siege of Mobile on 9 April 1865, John Black again led the 37th against rebel fortifications, storming into the Fort Blakely batteries like a blue tidal wave. The Greyhounds captured another battle flag, and Black was breveted brigadier general.

After the cessation of hostilities, the 37th was assigned to Texas, where a sizable army under General Phil Sheridan was "showing the flag" to French forces across the Rio Grande—the French had hoped to take advantage of the confusion of the Civil War to annex Texas to Mexico. The Greyhounds remained in Texas until May 1866, one of the last volunteer units to be mustered out of Federal service.

Black, however, had resigned in August 1865 and returned to Illinois. Crippled in both arms, he studied law in Chicago, practiced there briefly with his brother, and then opened a practice of his own in Danville in 1867. Active in politics and veterans affairs, he was elected to Congress in 1892, and in 1903 was elected national commander-in-chief of the G.A.R.

Soldier, attorney, holder of the Medal of Honor, John C. Black died in Chicago on 17 August 1915 and was buried in Danville two days later. His brother died the following year.