

"John E. Buffington's Medal of Honor"

Carroll County Times Article for 10 August 1997

By Jay A. Graybeal

In last week's column about Civil War soldiers from the Taneytown District, the roll of honor included the name of Lt. John E. Buffington of Co. C, 6th Maryland Infantry. Dr. Clotworthy Birnie had written in 1894 that Lt. Buffington was "one of the best soldiers in the regiment". Although certainly true, Buffington had been individually recognized as one of the most gallant men in the entire Army of the Potomac. Rewarded at the time with a most unusual monetary gift described below, he modestly did not seek full recognition until encouraged to do so long after the war. His unique story was published in the April 3, 1908 issue of the American Sentinel newspaper when he received the nation's highest gallantry award, the Congressional Medal of Honor:

"Reindollar's Opera House at Taneytown was the scene of an interesting ceremony on Saturday afternoon last in honor of a Carroll county veteran of the Civil War-First Lieut. John E. Buffington, of Co. C, Sixth Regiment Maryland Infantry-to whom was presented, on the occasion, one of the medals voted by Congress, during the war, for distinguished gallantry in action. The award of this medal was made directly after the close of the war, but Lieut. Buffington is as modest and retiring in disposition as he was courageous in battle, and never applied for it. How it came to be presented at this late day is fully explained in the address of Gen. John R. King, United States Pension Agent at Washington, made at the meeting on Saturday and which is given in full in this report. It is proper to state here that its recipient, who was a sergeant at the time the act for which it was awarded was performed, was also breveted first lieutenant for the same cause.

The attendance at the meeting in Taneytown, where the medal was presented, was an eloquent testimonial of the esteem in which Lieut. Buffington is held by the people of that section of this county, among whom his whole life, except his three years service in the army, has been passed. The opera house was crowded with people to its utmost capacity and fully half of those present were ladies.

Dr. Clotworthy Birnie presided. The opening address was made by Col. John R. Rouzer, of Thurmont, who was an officer of the Sixth Regiment. Gen. John R. King, in his address, outlined the history of the regiment, and incidentally gave the official data upon which Lieut. Buffington was awarded the medal, and also told of another award and honor received by him in the same connection. It is not necessary, therefore, to detail the facts again in this account.

The presentation address was made by Congressman John A. Goulden, of New York, a former resident of Taneytown, and was patriotic in sentiment and eloquent in expression. Lieut. Buffington made a brief but suitable reply and Mr. Jno. H. Mitten, of Co. A, Sixth Regiment, made a few remarks expressing the gratification he and his comrades of that company felt in this public recognition of the gallantry of their old comrade in arms.

The addresses were interspersed with patriotic songs, sung by a select choir, closing the meeting with the Star Spangled Banner, in which the audience joined with patriotic enthusiasm.

It is rather difficult to describe the medal intelligently. It is of gold and pendant from a blue ribbon bearing 43 white stars. To the bottom of the ribbon is attached an eagle of gold with extended wings, and next to this is a bar of gold bearing the word "valor." The next and last section resembles the badge

of the G.A.R. It is of gold, about the size of a silver half dollar and is in the form of a five-pointed star with a green enameled circular wreath around the central part around which also appears the words "U.S. of America." On the obverse side is the inscription, "The Congress to First Lieut. John E. Buffington, Co. C, 6th Md. Inf. Vols., Petersburg, April 2, 1865."

Lieut. Buffington is a native of this county and since the war has been engaged in successful farming in Middleburg district. He enlisted in Co. C, August 21, 1862 and served till June 20, 1865, and was in many hard fought battles. He has a wife, and one son and several adult daughters."

Gen. John R. King's address detailed the unique circumstances of the wartime monetary reward: "General Grant had placed in his hands the sum of \$400 as a reward of gallantry for the man who should first raise our flag over Richmond. As Richmond was not taken by assault, he deemed the donor's wishes would be best carried out by dividing the sum among three men, one to be selected by General Wright, Commander of the Sixth Corps, as most conspicuous for gallantry in carrying the lines at Petersburg, one to be selected by General Gibbons for gallantry in the assault on the fort south of Petersburg and one by Sheridan for gallantry at the battle of Five Forks.

When General Grant addressed General Wright to designate the man of the Sixth Corps he referred the order to the commander of the Third Division of the Sixth Corps and General Ricketts in turn referred the order to the commander of the Second Brigade of the Third Division of the Sixth Corps, and here is the endorsement and recommendation:

Headquarters, First Brigade,
Third Division, Sixth Corps,
May 20th, 1865
Respectfully forwarded.

Sergeant John E. Buffington, Company C, 6th Maryland (Second Brigade) is believed to have been the first enlisted man of the Third Division who mounted the parapet of the enemy's lines at Petersburg, April 2, 1865.

T. SEYMOUR
Brigadier General

It will be noticed that General Seymour was commander of the First Brigade. General J. Warren Keifer, whom we all love so well, was commander of the Second Brigade, of which our Regiment was a part. Why Seymour was called on to report I do not know. However, it is all the more honor as it is; but there is the record.

And now it will be surmised, why was not Comrade Buffington honored with the medal long ago?

For my part I did not know until a few months ago that he was not in possession of a medal. It was the general belief among his comrades that he had one. You got the money, didn't you, Comrade Buffington, and how much of it have you left; enough to pay the expenses of this occasion? When I heard from Comrade Buffington himself that he did not have the medal I at once enlisted the interest of Comrade Goulden, and that was easily obtained, and it is due entirely to his unceasing efforts that we are enabled to present this medal today.

Now in closing, Comrade let me say how much pleasure I have in witnessing the fruition of a long delayed bestowal of this medal of honor. Your comrades of the Sixth Maryland are proud of you. Your

life in this community, where you were born and raised, has been that of an upright and honorable citizen as this large gathering of your neighbors and friends attest."

The medal presented to Lt. Buffington in 1908 was of the third pattern, awarded from 1804 to 1944. Unlike the original bronze medals of the Civil War era, the later pattern was made of gold with green enamel highlights. Lt. Buffington was the only Carroll County Civil War soldier who received the nation's highest honor.

Photo caption: Sgt. John E. Buffington posed for this tintype portrait sometime after 1863 when he was promoted to sergeant in Co. C, 6th Maryland Infantry Regiment. He was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor in 1908 for bravery in the Battle of Petersburg, Va., on April 2, 1865. Courtesy of Barry Garner.