

# **THE REVOCATION OF THE MEDAL OF HONOR OF SERGEANT JOHN B. LYNCH, THIRD INDIANA CAVALRY**

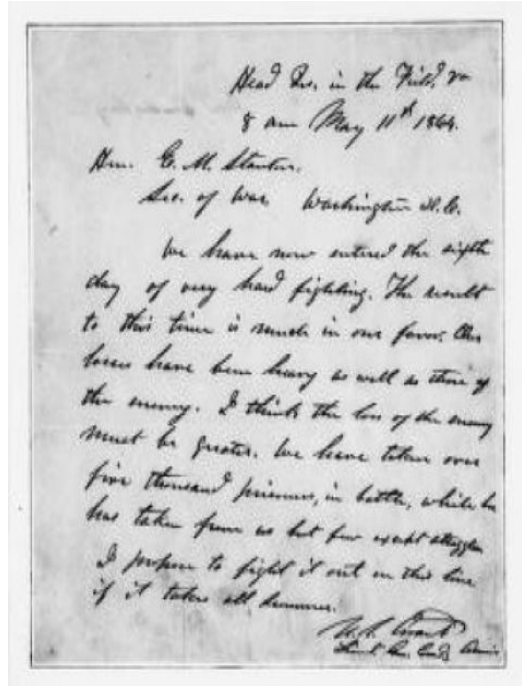
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The Medal of Honor Historical Society of the United States has identified on its website 79 Medal of Honor recipients whose enlistments occurred in the State of Indiana.<sup>1</sup> However, the Society does not include Sgt. John B. Lynch, another Indiana enlistee whose Medal of Honor was awarded in 1871 but revoked in 1917. Perhaps more so than any other recipient from the Civil War era, Sgt. Lynch's actions were directly intertwined with three of the most prominent figures of that conflict — President Abraham Lincoln, General Ulysses S. Grant, and Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton. And yet, Sgt. Lynch's Medal of Honor was revoked by a Congressionally mandated Medal of Honor Review Board chaired by retired U.S. Army Lieutenant General Nelson Miles. Prior to the revocation of Lynch's Medal and several others, Miles warned the Secretary of War and Congress that, absent a needed amendment to the statute that created the Review Board, there would result a "grave injustice" for a "class" of Medal of Honor recipients whose awards would necessarily be revoked without such an amendment.<sup>2</sup> Miles drafted specific language for a proposed amendment to avoid the anticipated "injustice" but that amendment never occurred despite its official referral to Congress by the Secretary of War.<sup>3</sup>

In early May 1864, General Ulysses S. Grant, with 100,000 Union troops positioned near Spotsylvania Courthouse, Virginia, made preparations for his next critical engagement with over 50,000 nearby Confederate forces lead by General Robert E. Lee. President Lincoln and Secretary of War Stanton were in dire need of communicating with General Grant. They wanted to know Grant's next plan at this important juncture of the war. For a messenger to travel to Grant at Spotsylvania Courthouse and return with his response meant a harrowing and dangerous 150-mile round trip from Washington, D.C. The messenger who volunteered was Sgt. John B. Lynch who travelled secretly to General Grant between May 8 and May 11, 1864, through areas in central Virginia filled with Confederate troops. The battle at the Wilderness had been fought on May 5 and 6, and the battle at Spotsylvania Courthouse would rage for 12 days from May 8 to 21. The dispatch that Sgt. Lynch carried back from Grant on May 11, 1864, remains, to this day, one of the most quoted and poignant communications of the Civil War. Grant advised Lincoln in his message that "I will fight it out on this line if it takes all summer." Circulated to newspapers throughout the United States by Secretary Stanton, that message reflected Grant's resolve to end the war at all costs and reinforced Lincoln's implicit trust in him.



*General Grant at Spotsylvania Courthouse*



*Grant's Message to Stanton/Lincoln*

Born in Ireland around 1830, John B. Lynch married his wife Mary in St. Louis in 1860. On August 22, 1861, Lynch enlisted in Madison, Indiana in Company D, Third Indiana Infantry to serve for three years.<sup>4</sup> Company D would see action at significant battles, including Antietam and Gettysburg. Upon his discharge, Lynch re-enlisted on February 18, 1864, in the “General Services” of the Army in Washington, D.C. where he was assigned to the Office of Secretary of War Stanton.<sup>5</sup> He served in that role until his retirement on August 22, 1876. Lynch’s daily clerical and messenger duties in the Secretary’s office in 1864 were likely quite routine, except for one remarkable undertaking in May 1864 that was “extraordinary, hazardous, and dangerous” (using the words that Nelson Miles would later recite to describe the type of conduct that justified Medals of Honor.)

In his letter to the War Department dated November 15, 1871, Sgt. Lynch provided the following description of his mission and his personal interactions in May 1864 with Secretary of War Stanton, President Lincoln, and General Grant:

*I have the honor to make application for a Medal of Honor under the Act of Congress providing medals for such non-commissioned officers and soldiers as particularly distinguished themselves in action or otherwise, and in support of my application, beg leave to state the following: I enlisted in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Indiana Cavalry, July 10, 1861, and after serving actively in the field for over two years, was detailed for duty in the Secretary of War's Office.*

*On the 8<sup>th</sup> of May, 1864, I was called into the presence of the President and the Secretary of War, the former stated that he had not heard from General Grant since the battle of the Wilderness, and did not know anything of his whereabouts; that he had very important dispatches for him, and asked if I would undertake to deliver them. I was conveyed to Belle Plain in a steamer, and from there passed through the enemy's country to Fredericksburg, and having no knowledge who held it, crossed the river on a raft. After leaving there, I succeeded in escaping capture and in finding General Grant before Spotsylvania Court House, May 11<sup>th</sup>. I was detained by him until evening, when the dispatches were given me to carry back. They, I understand, conveyed the announcement of his determination "to fight it out on this line, if it takes all summer."*

*The President laid great stress on the importance of the papers I carried, and acknowledging the peril of the difficulties of the enterprise, Secretary Stanton promised me a Medal; which, however, I never received.*

*I make this particular statement as a ground for my application, although my services in the field would, I think, entitle me to consideration.<sup>6</sup>*



*Secretary of War, Edwin M. Stanton*

It took only three weeks after Sgt. Lynch's application and Secretary of War William W. Belknap approved his Medal of Honor after consulting with President Grant. In his letter of December 7, 1871, to Sgt. Lynch (who was still in service at the War Department), Secretary Belknap noted:

*It affords me pleasure to inform you that in consideration of the prompt and efficient manner in which important military duties entrusted to you during the war were*

*executed, and as a recognition of your praiseworthy conduct during several engagements and at other times, The President has been pleased to bestow upon you one of the Medals of Honor authorized by Congress to be given non-commissioned officers and privates of the Army for meritorious services. Your name and regiment has been engraved on the Medal, it is herewith enclosed.*<sup>7</sup>

(Underlining is in original document) (Emphasis added.)

Secretary Belknap's notification of President Grant's authorization not only refers to Sgt. Lynch's "entrusted military duties" as a carrier of dispatches, but Belknap's notification also cites Sgt. Lynch's "conduct during several engagements and at other times." This conforms with Sgt. Lynch's letter wherein he stated that he also believed "my services in the field would, I think, entitle me to consideration" for a Medal of Honor. These services, while not detailed, would be consistent with the engagements of the Third Indiana Cavalry at Antietam and Gettysburg.

Until his death on November 2, 1888, John B. Lynch was a proud Medal of Honor recipient living in Washington, D.C. working for the post office after his honorable discharge in 1876. However, almost 30 years after his death, with no consideration to due process and without reference to his interactions with Lincoln, Stanton and Grant in the perilous actions leading to his award, the Medal of Honor of Sgt. John B. Lynch was officially and summarily revoked by the Medal of Honor Review Board chaired by the retired Nelson Miles.

By the time Lieutenant General Nelson Miles retired in 1903, his 42-year record of military accomplishments was staggering. From the Civil War, through the Indian War period, and then the Spanish American War, his soldier and leadership skills were exemplary. In addition, with respect to the history of the nation's highest award, the Medal of Honor, his involvement is likely without parallel. That involvement made him an obvious candidate to chair the Congressionally mandated 1916 Medal of Honor Review Board and, most importantly, to understand the consequences of the actions required under the statute that created the Review Board.



*Lieutenant General Nelson Miles*

Consider the following accomplishments of Nelson Miles:

- He was wounded four times during the Civil War; in 1892, Miles was awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions at Chancellorsville on May 2-3, 1863. At the time of his award in 1892, the War Department was in the midst of the extraordinary wave of applications during the 1890s from Civil War soldiers seeking Medal of Honor recognition. Many “applicants” for the Medal were rejected—some because they involved self-nominations with no supporting witnesses or documentation. Nonetheless, nearly 600 of the 1525 Civil War recipients of the Medal of Honor were awarded their Medals during the 1890s. As Commanding General of the Army from 1895 to 1903, Miles was a firsthand witness to the enormous challenges confronted by the War Department in processing the Civil War applicants. During his service as Commanding General of the Army, he also saw another 239 Medal of Honor awards made to soldiers who served in the Spanish American War, the Box Rebellion, and the Philippine Insurrection.
- He was personally responsible for the recommendations of Medals of Honor for thirty recipients who served during the Great Sioux War, specifically for actions in Montana between October 1876 and January 1877 at Cedar Creek, Redwater Creek (Ash Creek), and Wolf Mountain. Colonel Miles’s adjutant during the Great Sioux War was Lt. Frank Baldwin, a two-time Medal of Honor awardee (three times recommended) who later served in the Spanish American War, the Philippine Insurrection and WWI, and who retired as a brigadier general.
- He was also involved in the recommendation process for a number of other Medal of Honor recipients, including twenty-one soldiers who were issued Medals on April 23, 1875, for actions at Washita River, Texas in 1874.
- During his military career he served alongside several Medal of Honor recipients such as Generals William Shafter, Henry Lawton, and Leonard Wood.
- He was involved in the process that led to the Medal of Honor ribbon redesign in 1896.

When the Medal of Honor Roll Act was passed in April 1916 to certify Medal recipients for pensions, there was also a move in Congress to look more critically at the justifications for Medal of Honor awards for the 2,625 Army recipients prior to that date, particularly those for Civil War recipients. This was encouraged by some living Medal of Honor recipients who were concerned about the factual support for Civil War era awards. As a result, in 1916 Congress established the Medal of Honor Review Board, which had the authority in Section 122 of the enabling law to revoke Medals of Honor

*for any cause other than distinguished conduct by an officer or an enlisted man in action involving actual conflict with an enemy by such officer or enlisted man or by troops with which he was serving at the time of such action.”<sup>8</sup> (Emphasis added)*

The 1916 Review Board was only tasked to review Medals of Honor previously issued to soldiers under the 1862 Army Medal of Honor statute, not sailors and marines who received their Medals of Honor under the virtually identical 1861 Navy Medal of Honor statute.

Under Section 122, and for the first time since the Army Medal of Honor statute was passed in 1862, a condition was imposed by Congress in 1916 — retroactively to be sure — which required that the cited distinguished conduct of a recipient had to have occurred “in action involving actual conflict with the enemy.” This new standard would prove to be the basis for the Review Board to revoke 864 Medals awarded to the 27<sup>th</sup> Maine Infantry where the Medals had been reissued as inducements to reenlist in the Civil War. The Board also revoked 29 Medals of Honor awarded to soldiers who served as funeral guards to President Lincoln body after his assassination. However, for other revocations, like that of Sgt. John B. Lynch, the application of this same new standard represented what now appears to be a seriously erroneous assessment of the facts, quite apart from the questionable legal basis of applying such a standard to awards that occurred decades earlier under different interpretations of the original 1862 Medal of Honor statute.<sup>9</sup>

In his definitive work entitled *The Medal of Honor-The Evolution of America’s Highest Military Decoration* (2018), historian Dwight Mears explains at page 53:

*Certainly, implementing the 1916 law was a form of ex post facto legislation....it would be problematic for the War Department to apply a double standard by imposing criteria that had not existed when many of the medals were originally awarded. Further, there had been “no high judicial interpretation of the medal of honor laws,” meaning that there was virtually no case law to guide the board’s decisions. This set a tone of caution, as the board wanted to avoid, “as far as practicable, retroactive judgment on the course of the War Department in a matter lawfully within its discretion.”*

Mears, at pp. 53-54 of his book, recounts the state of the Army’s original award criteria:

*In terms of evaluating the meaning of distinguished conduct, the Army’s 1862 act had merely stated that the medal was intended for soldiers who “shall most distinguish themselves by their gallantry in action, **and other soldierlike qualities.**” Similarly, the 1863 act expanded the medal to Army officers and specified that it was intended for soldiers who “**have most distinguished** or who may hereafter most distinguish themselves in action.” .... Thus, although all the laws included the word “distinguish” or “distinguished,” they conveyed little legislative intent, and meaning of the word itself was highly subjective. (Emphasis added.)*

Interestingly and significantly, as the Medal of Honor Review Board assumed its duties in 1916 and studied the wording of Section 122 and its revocation mandate, General Miles and his fellow Board members became very concerned about the clarity of Section 122 and a possible conflict with the original Army Medal of Honor statute. In a letter dated July 19, 1916, to the Secretary of War, Miles expressed the need for clarification of Section 122 and

its revocation standard “in the interests of justice.” Miles wrote:

*While some medals of honor have been given to officers and soldiers not in accordance with law, and to civilians for heroic acts, without authority of law, it is assumed it is not the intention of Congress to deprive anyone of this distinguished honor where it has been worthily bestowed for most extraordinary, hazardous and dangerous service. Section 122 of the act of Congress makes no mention of the acts of 1862 and 1863, and would seem to repeal, or at least, annul those acts that that have been on the statute books for more than 50 years. The board is informed that said paragraph, or Section 122, was not in either of the House or Senate bills, but was inserted for some purpose in conference. **If the provisions of section 122 are strictly complied with, the board is of the opinion that grave injustice would be done to a class of public servants who have rendered most conspicuous acts of heroism that would be recognized in any army in the world. It leaves the Board and the honorable Secretary of War with no discretion, and would be a cruel act toward a class that the Government has manifestly desired to honor.** The board, therefore, respectfully requests that the honorable Secretary of War will ask that the Army appropriations bill, now pending in Congress be amended by adding the following paragraph, to wit:*

***“Section 122 of the act of Congress approved June 3, 1916 shall not apply to persons who have lawfully received their medals of honor, nor to anyone who has rendered extraordinary, hazardous, and dangerous service to the Government.”***<sup>10</sup> (Emphasis added.)

On July 24, 1916, Secretary of War Newton D. Baker reviewed Miles’s letter and referred it for action to the respective Chairmen of the Senate and House Committees on Military Affairs. The amendment, as proposed by General Miles, was offered in the Senate two days later on July 26, 1916. However, given the “advanced stage of the session” of Congress, no action was taken. The 1916 Review Board’s final report noted that no action on the amendment had been taken since it was “impracticable to secure modification of the act at that time.” Significantly, however, the Board noted in its final report that it “begs leave to express the hope that the War Department will defer action, in certain cases to be specified hereafter, until the matter can receive careful consideration of Congress.”<sup>11</sup>

Accordingly, Miles’ dire warning of “a grave injustice” in the form of Medal of Honor revocations for those “who have rendered most conspicuous acts of heroism” went unheeded. And in the case of a handful of recipients — like Sgt. John B. Lynch — those revocations would, in Miles’ own words, prove “to be a cruel act toward a class that the Government manifestly desired to honor.”<sup>12</sup>

As noted above, Sgt. Lynch’s delivery of dispatches to and from General Grant between May 8 and May 11, 1864, occurred at a critical and deadly point in the Civil War. The battles at the

Wilderness and Spotsylvania Courthouse between May 5 and May 21 resulted in over 32,000 Union casualties and 21,000 Confederate casualties. The intensities of these battles have been chronicled many times over. Sgt. Lynch's passage through and near Confederate territory was unquestionably in the midst of a dangerous "actual conflict with the enemy."

The fact that Sgt. Lynch was recognized by Secretary of War Belknap in his Medal of Honor award for additional "conduct during several engagements" is not acknowledged or even addressed in the Review Board's revocation of his Medal of Honor. As the basis for its revocation, the Review Board, at p. 134 of its report, only summarily cites the lack of distinction for "one John B. Lynch, for carrying dispatches."<sup>13</sup> The record of the Review Board is devoid of any reference to the circumstances of those dispatches in May 1864, the involvement of Lincoln and Grant, or the promise of a Medal of Honor from Stanton — all of which were reflected in Sgt. Lynch's 1871 letter in his official Medal of Honor file and recognized in Secretary Belknap's notification to Sgt. Lynch. Those documents should have been in the file considered by the Review Board, but the record is not clear as to what was actually considered.

It should have also been significant to Miles and the Review Board that the authorization for Sgt. Lynch's Medal of Honor award in 1871 was provided by the very person — President Grant — who was the source of the famous and important dispatch delivered by Sgt. Lynch seven years prior.

Remarkably, the Review Board's revocation of Sgt. Lynch's Medal of Honor is also inconsistent with other similar "messenger" Medal recipients whose actions were reviewed but where no revocation occurred. On July 9, 1876, while Grant was President and two weeks after the June 25, 1876, Battle of Little Big Horn, General Alfred Terry sought volunteers to carry a message to General George Crook concerning Army plans to pursue Indian participants in the aftermath of the battle. While the Army knew that many Indian participants had generally fled the area of the Little Big Horn in different directions in the two weeks since the battle, General Terry still needed to communicate with General Crook who was camped near present day Sheridan, Wyoming, which was about 100 miles from the battle site. Three soldiers, Privates James Bell, William Evans, and Benjamin Stewart from Company E, Seventh U.S. Infantry volunteered and carried the dispatch to Crook. They travelled safely and returned to General Terry on July 25, 1876. There is nothing in General Terry's account written on July 26, 1876, regarding encounters with Indians during the soldiers' journey to Crook's camp. Terry's report recognized the soldiers as volunteers and lauded their "soldier-like" achievement.<sup>14</sup>

The Medal of Honor citations for all three soldiers specifically cite their actions for carrying "dispatches" to General Crook.<sup>15</sup> Yet, the Review Board revoked Lynch's Medal of Honor "for carrying dispatches."

There is one other even more noteworthy case of a Medal of Honor "messenger" whose Medal was allowed to stand after review by the Miles' Review Board. In 1898, Assistant Army Surgeon Leonard Wood (later retired as Major General and highly decorated) was awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions in May 1886 when he volunteered to carry a dispatch for Army Captain Henry S. Lawton (later of the rank of Major General and a Medal of Honor recipient). During

the 1886 campaign to capture Geronimo and a small number of his Apache tribe who had escaped from the San Carlos Reservation, Captain Lawton needed a message to be sent from his camp near the border of Mexico to his superior who was none other than Brigadier General Nelson Miles. In April 1886, General Miles had assumed command of the Army's effort to capture Geronimo. Captain Lawton needed additional orders from General Miles regarding the planned pursuit of Geronimo, but Miles was still stationed at a distant post and could only be reached by telegraph. Wood volunteered for the messenger assignment in May 1886 and successfully traveled 70 miles from near the Mexican border to the closest telegraph station — north in Wilcox, Arizona.

Both Lawton and Miles would eventually champion the award of a Medal of Honor to Wood, even though it was initially denied based on a Judge Advocate General opinion that Wood was not eligible because, in 1886, he was then only a “contract surgeon” and not a soldier enlisted in the actual service to the Army.<sup>16</sup> Wood received his Medal on April 8, 1898, and in his official Medal of Honor citation, his 70-mile journey to Wilcox is described as one that took him through a region “infested with hostile Indians.”<sup>17</sup> According to Apache historian and author Bill Cavaliere, the known facts in May 1886 were that most of Geronimo's Chiricahua Apache tribe (numbering in the hundreds) were still on the San Carlos Reservation over 100 miles north of Wilcox under Army guard. Only Geronimo and about 70 Apache (many of whom were women and children) had escaped and were still being pursued by Lawton and his troops.<sup>18</sup> As a result, it was not likely that there was much danger along Wood's route to Wilcox. Nonetheless, Geronimo's warriors had been threatening and Wood's action as a volunteer was important in telegraphing a critical message to Miles.

Wood's Medal of Honor was reviewed by Miles' Medal of Honor Review Board in 1916, but it was not revoked. Like the three messengers under General Terry's command in 1876, the “messenger” Wood met the new Section 122 standard of being engaged in an “action involving actual conflict with the enemy.” And yet the 1864 actions of Sgt. John B. Lynch did not meet that same standard — despite confronting significantly greater immediate peril with a large Confederate enemy force.

John B. Lynch's obituary in 1888 read “He carried a famous dispatch ...to Lincoln ... the famous one: ‘I will fight it out on this line if it takes all summer.’ Prior to his death, Lynch was President of the Washington, D.C. West End Catholic Society, a member of John A. Rawlins GAR Post No.1, and active in Company D, 8<sup>th</sup> regiment of the “Boys in Blue” — a group of Civil War veterans.<sup>19</sup> John B. Lynch is buried in Mount Olivet Cemetery in Washington, D.C. but his grave marker is no longer visible with the passage of time. He died as a deserving and respected Medal of Honor recipient. The location of his revoked Medal of Honor is unknown.

In 1916, as well as any member of the military, General Miles knew the history of the Medal of Honor and the original criteria for the award. He knew the consequences of what Congress had directed under the new standard in Section 122, and he knew what would occur if that mandate was not amended. The record in that regard is clear, as is the action of Sgt. Lynch in May 1864. Miles insightful prediction of “injustices” is now well acknowledged and indeed the revocations of six Medals of Honor by the 1916 Review Board have been rescinded since 1977.<sup>20</sup>

The admonition of the late U.S. Senator Daniel K. Inouye, himself a Medal of Honor recipient, never rang truer than in the case of Sgt. John B. Lynch: “There is no statute of limitations on honor. It’s never too late to do what is right. A nation that forgets or fails to honor our heroes is a nation destined for oblivion.”

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<sup>1</sup> See website [mohhsus.org](http://mohhsus.org) for list of Medal of Honor recipients from the State of Indiana.

<sup>2</sup> 68<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Session, May 19-September 19, 1919, Vol. 14, General Staff Corps and Medals of Honor, Letter from Secretary of War, July 22, 1919, Document 58, p.112 (Hereinafter in these footnotes, this document is referred to as “Document 58.”)

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> NARA RG 94, Entry 409, Enlisted Branch Document File, Folder B-4463-7-EB-1811, John B. Lynch Medal of Honor file.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Document 58, p. 110.

<sup>9</sup> Eberhardt, Michael C, *The Medal of Honor: Its Dark Sides* (Danville, Illinois: Faulstich Printing, Second Edition 2025) pp. 95-102 for case studies of other revocations that are factually challenged by the author.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 111.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 112.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 111.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 134.

<sup>14</sup> General Field Orders No. 5, Headquarters Department of Dakota, “In the Field Camp at mouth of Big Horn River, July 26, 1876, By command of Brigadier General Terry,” prepared by Ed.W. Smith, Capt., 18<sup>th</sup> Infantry, Acting Assistant Adjutant General.

<sup>15</sup> Recipient Citations for James Bell, William Evans, and Benjamin Stewart, Congressional Medal of Honor Society.

<sup>16</sup> Mears, Dwight S., *The Medal of Honor - The Evolution Of America’s Highest Military Decoration* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2018) p.58.

<sup>17</sup> Recipient Citation for Leonard Wood, Congressional Medal of Honor Society.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Bill Cavaliere; Cavaliere, Bill, *The Chiricahua Apache, A Concise History* (Rodeo, N.M.: Eco Publishing, 2020) pp 85-88 for events relating efforts to capture Geronimo in the summer of 1886.

<sup>19</sup> The National Tribune, Washington, D.C., November 8, 1888, p. 8.

<sup>20</sup> The following Medal of Honor revocations have been rescinded: Dr. Mary Walker in 1977, and the revocations of William “Buffalo Bill” Cody, Amos Chapman, William “Billy” Dixon, James Dozier, and William Woodall were rescinded in 1989.