

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2024

Remarks on Presenting the Medal of Honor Posthumously to Private Philip G. Shadrach and Private George D. Wilson

July 3, 2024

Please be seated. Thank you.

This is a long time in coming.

One year into the Civil War to abolish slavery, a fighting raged across the States. The fate of the Nation hung in the balance. President Abraham Lincoln created an award to honor ordinary Americans who showed extraordinary courage in the battle to save the Union.

The award was a star-shaped medal made of copper and coated in bronze. At first, it was called the Army Medal of Honor. In time, to capture the full capacity of our Armed Forces, it became known simply as the Medal of Honor. Today it's our Nation's highest military honor.

Secretary Austin, Secretary McDonough, Secretary Wormuth, Chairman Brown, General Milley, previous Medal of Honor recipients who are here, distinguished guests: The very first recipients of the Medal of Honor were a small band known as Andrews' Raiders, named for a spy for the Union Army, James Andrews, who led one of the most daring operations in the entire Civil War. Every soldier who joined that mission was awarded the Medal of Honor except for two: two soldiers who died because of that operation, but never received this recognition.

Today we right that wrong. Today they finally receive the recognition they deserve.

Private George Wilson, born in Belmont County, Ohio. In his early thirties, not long after the Civil War began, he enlisted in the Union Army. He joined the 2d Ohio Volunteer Infantry Regiment. He was a father, a mechanic, and he was a hell of a debater. He always was ready to persuade, argue, and, as one family member put it, "dress anyone down" if the need be.

Private Philip Shadrach, born in Somerset County, Pennsylvania. By the time he was a teenager, Philip was an orphan, a laborer—did everything he could to get by. And from what we know, he was a free spirit, always searching for adventure, excitement, intrigue. In his early twenties, Philip enlisted, joining the Ohio regiment that George did—the same one.

With us today are members of those families: Theresa Chandler, George's great-great-granddaughter; Gerald Taylor, Philip's great-grandnephew. They shared with us how the stories of their brave ancestors were passed down through their families for generation after generation.

For Philip and George and their brothers in arms, serving our country meant serving our country—our country—fighting and even dying to preserve the Union and the sacred values it was founded upon: freedom, justice, fairness, unity. George and Philip were willing to shed their blood to make these ideals real.

Folks, it was April 7, 1862. James Andrews, the Union spy, who regularly sneaked behind Confederate lines, was preparing to lead a daring scheme. A group of two dozen soldiers, including George and Philip, would travel 200 miles deep into the Confederate territory and steal a Confederate train—a train near Atlanta and drive it north to Chattanooga, just over the Georgia border, which Union troops were preparing to capture—that is, Chattanooga.

Along the train journey, they would destroy enemy bridges, railroad tracks, telegraph lines, disrupting communications and vital supply lines, sabotaging the railroad that the Confederate Army used to move troops. All of that would make the Union capture of Chattanooga much more

likely. And that would cut off the Confederate Army from both Ohio and Mississippi River Valleys, a huge—a huge—strategic victory that could bring the war to a swift end.

The risk of this mission and the risk of all this mission were enormous. If caught, they would certainly be killed. Philip, George, all the men were given a chance to walk away. Not one of them did. Not one of them walked away. Instead, they changed into civilian clothes, got a few hours' sleep, and set out for Georgia.

Several days later, nearly all of them, including George and Philip, made it to the rendezvous point: a train station just north of Atlanta. They gathered at midnight and waited until morning. When the conductor and passengers disembarked for breakfast, they made—that's when they made their move.

Quickly and quietly, they detached three box cars and a locomotive, hopped in, and began moving at full speed north to Tennessee. Almost immediately, their problems were increased. Rain made it nearly impossible to burn the tracks and the bridges along the way. There were other trains on the track that were not supposed to have been there, slowing them down considerably.

By then, Confederate forces were in hot pursuit. But George and Philip and the rest of the Raiders didn't quit. They kept going nearly for 7 hours, destroying as much track as they could along the way and cutting as many telegraph wires as they could.

They almost made it to [out of; White House correction] Georgia, but about 15 miles from Chattanooga, they ran out of fuel, and the Confederates closed in. The Raiders took off on foot, running and hiding in the woods. They survived there for weeks, but one by one, Confederate soldiers, supporters, and their bloodhounds rounded them up. They were taken to a Confederate prison; held in a tiny, underground room; chained by their necks and their wrists; starved.

Still, the men remained unbowed and unbroken. Eventually, eight escaped. Six were exchanged for Confederate prisoners. The rest, including Philip and George, were tried as spies and both sentenced to death.

When that fateful day came, as they approached the gallows, Philip and George stood tall. A crowd gathered around them. Private Wilson turned to face the crowd, summoned the ultimate measure of grace, and, according to reports from that day, this is what he said. He looked at the crowd, and he said he believed they were wrong, but he did not harbor hostility toward the people of the South. He said it was not them, but their leaders who were responsible for the rebellion. And he said the time would come when the Union would be restored and the American flag would wave over the entire Nation once again.

Ladies and gentlemen, until the very end, George and Philip believed in the United States of America, the only nation on Earth founded on an idea. Every other nation in the history of the world is based on geography, ethnicity, religion, or some other attribute, but we're the only nation founded on an idea. And that idea is, we're—all men are created equal, deserve to be treated equally throughout our lives. We haven't always lived up to that, but, like George and Philip, we've never walked away from it either.

Their heroic deeds went unacknowledged for over a century, but time did not erase their valor. And they want to fight for—what they fought for and they died is just as precious today as it was then: unity over disunion, freedom over subjugation, progress over retreat, truth over lies.

Let me end with this. Tomorrow is the Fourth of July, another reminder of why it's so important to know our history, not to erase our history; to remember the sacred cause of American democracy and not make up a Lost Cause to justify evil of slavery; to remember the Nation that George and Philip fought for and died for: the United States of America.

That's who we are. That's who we are: the United States of America. And there's nothing—nothing—beyond our capacity in the United States if we work together.

So God bless you all, and may God protect our troops.

And with that, it's my honor to ask the Military Aide to read the citations.

Thank you.

[At this point, Lt. Col. Daniel K. DeRusha, USAF, Air Force Aide to the President, read the citations, and the President presented the medals, assisted by Lt. Col. Azizi V. Wesmiller, USA, Army Aide to the President. Following the presentation of the medals, Maj. Gen. William Green, Jr., USA, Army Chief of Chaplains, said a prayer.]

NOTE: The President spoke at 4:40 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Secretary of the Army Christine E. Wormuth; and Gen. Charles Q. "C.Q." Brown, Jr., USAF, and Gen. Mark A. Milley, USA (Ret.), Chairman and former Chairman, respectively, of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on July 5.

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