

Obama Honors Civil War Hero With Medal Of Honor

BY MEG JONES
Milwaukee Journal Sentinel (MCT)

WASHINGTON — On the last day of America's bloodiest battle, Alonzo Cushing was cut down next to the artillery guns he refused to leave despite the horrendous wounds that left him almost speechless as he whispered commands to his soldiers.

Confederate soldiers were making what would become known as Pickett's Charge and in the hailstorm of artillery shells and shrapnel that would kill so many on that hot July day, a bullet struck Cushing in the face, killing him instantly.

Many men lost their lives at Gettysburg, many were recognized for their bravery. While Cushing's valor and heroism were undisputed, it took more than 151 years for the Delafield, Wis., native to be recognized with America's highest medal for valor.

Thursday, President Barack Obama awarded the Medal of Honor to Cushing's family in a poignant ceremony in the White House. Normally, the nation's highest medal for bravery is given within a few years of the heroism.

"But sometimes even the most extraordinary stories can get lost in the passage of time," Obama told a group of about 60 that included family, military members and Medal of Honor recipients. "This medal is a reminder that no matter how long it takes, it is never too late to do the right thing."

Cushing was awarded the Medal of Honor through the efforts of Margaret Zerwekh, an amateur historian who decided to research the Cushing family after moving to the Cushing homestead in Delafield in the 1960s. When she pored through accounts of Cushing's heroism on July 3, 1863, and read memoirs of the men who were with the first lieutenant when he died, she thought he deserved the Medal of Honor.

Through more than three decades Zerwekh never gave up, despite numerous setbacks, mounds of paperwork and several changes in Wisconsin's congressional delegation. And Thursday, Zerwekh, now 94, was at the White House to witness a ceremony she spent so much time and effort to see.

"He deserved it," Zerwekh said following the ceremony in the Roosevelt Room. "I didn't think it would ever happen, I really didn't."

Standing at a podium underneath a painting of a rough riding Teddy Roosevelt, Obama singled out Zerwekh for her efforts, which started in the early 1980s when she contacted then-U.S. Sen. William Proxmire of Wisconsin.

Obama noted "she even managed to bring Republicans and Democrats together to make this happen. Margaret, we may call on you again some time in the next several months."

Wisconsin Reps. Ron Kind, a Democrat, and Republican F. James Sensenbrenner attended Thursday's ceremony.

"They say the wheels of democracy grind slowly, but 151 years slow?" said Kind, a descendant of two brothers who fought with the 7th Wisconsin during the Civil War. "This is the classic example of how two individuals can make a difference — Alonzo Cushing and Margaret Zerwekh."

It was the first time in almost four decades a Medal of Honor has been awarded to a Wisconsin native. The previous medal was posthumously awarded to Lance Sijan in 1976.

Cushing's medal brings the total number of Medals of Honor for heroism during the three-day battle at Gettysburg to 63. It has been extremely rare for Medals of Honor to be awarded posthumously for service in the Civil War, said Laura Jowdy, archivist with the Medal of Honor Society.

The last Medal of Honor awarded for bravery during the Civil War was in 2001 to Cpl. Andrew Jackson Smith which gives Cushing the distinction of having the most time elapsed between the heroic act and awarding of the medal.

It took the Army Past Conflict Repatriations Branch weeks to track down Cushing's family, following Obama's announcement of the honor in late August. Cushing died childless at the age of 22 and none of his brothers had children.

Receiving the Medal of Honor — the modern version with blue ribbon, not the bronze-colored medal with red, white and blue ribbon given during the Civil War — was Helen Loring Ensign, 85, of Palm Springs, Calif. A first cousin, twice removed, Ensign is related to Cushing through his mother.

Wearing a white jacket with light blue accents and a button with Cushing's picture, Ensign stood next to the president as the citation was read and a soldier held up a shadow box with the medal and brass name plate.

Ensign has visited Gettysburg many times and stood at the spot where her ancestor fell next to his artillery gun. A spot now memorialized with a stone marker.

"I remember being very, very proud to see a stone in his name. Gettysburg was a part of our family history," Ensign said.

Family members attending the ceremony included several named Cushing or Alonzo. Some learned of each other through efforts to trace the family tree for the Medal of Honor ceremony, said Ensign's niece Jessica Loring. In Washington, D.C., this week, family members met Zerwekh for the first time.

"We owe a great debt to her for doing this," said Loring.

Cushing's family wants to loan his Medal of Honor to museums and schools, Loring said, "because it's important to show the price of freedom."

On Friday, Cushing will be inducted into the Pentagon Hall of Heroes in a ceremony performed for all Medal of Honor recipients. Later this month, the Navy cruiser USS Gettysburg will honor Cushing by naming its officer's dining hall after him. Next week, the U.S. Military Academy will add his name to its memorial to graduates who earned the Medal of Honor.

An 1861 West Point graduate, Cushing was encouraged by his mother to attend because there was no other way he could afford a college education. His brother William attended the Naval Academy at Annapolis and served during the Civil War as a naval commander.

While researching his 1993 biography "Cushing of Gettysburg: The Story of a Union Artillery Commander," Kent Masterson Brown read Cushing's letters and journals and learned he was a fierce patriot who acted as a father figure to his younger brothers. Before Gettysburg, Cushing fought at Antietam, Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville, as well as the Battle of Bull Run, occasionally serving as a topographical engineer because he was good at drawing and mapmaking.

On July 3, 1863, he was commander of Battery A, 4th U.S. Artillery which was stationed on Cemetery Ridge near a small grove of trees in a confined spot known as "the Angle" because of a stone fence used by Union troops on the third day of the battle.

The Angle was front and center of Pickett's Charge. Before that desperate and ultimately disastrous gamble, Confederate artillery launched a ferocious bombardment that practically wiped out Cushing's unit. Soldiers in blue and gray were only a few hundred yards away from each other, trying to kill their enemy.

"This is the last great effort

(Gen. Robert E.) Lee is trying to make for the Confederacy. He'll play every card he can," said Paul C. Jussel, a military studies professor at the U.S. Army War College. "Ultimately, it doesn't work and Cushing had a lot to do with that."

At one point, some of Cushing's men tried to flee after the wheel of their 3-inch ordnance rifle was destroyed and he pointed his pistol while ordering them to replace the wheel and return to their battle station, said Brown. Holding his thumb in the vent of his artillery guns to prevent gases from escaping, his leather glove was burned away. When his body

was later recovered from the battlefield, doctors discovered the flesh of this thumb had burned to the bone.

During the Confederate bombardment Cushing was struck in the shoulder and abdomen. Holding his guts in his hand he continued to exhort his soldiers. Historians estimate it was two hours from the time of his initial wounds until he was killed.

Though his 1st sergeant, who would receive the Medal of Honor, encouraged him to seek medical aid, Cushing refused to leave.

"He said 'No, I'll fight it out or die in the attempt,'" said Brown.



OLIVIER DOULIERY/ABACA PRESS/MCT
U.S. President Barack Obama presents the Medal of Honor posthumously to Army 1st Lt. Alonzo H. Cushing for conspicuous gallantry to Helen Loring Ensign in the Roosevelt Room of the White House on Thursday, in Washington, D.C.

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Team

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him execute his vision for the state."

Nathan Sanderson will become director of policy and operations, overseeing the workings of many government departments, as well as the governor's office. He has served for the last four years as a policy adviser focusing on agriculture and natural resources issues, and before that was director of the Office of Agricultural Policy in the state Agriculture Department.

Sanderson will handle some of the duties of outgoing Chief of Staff Dusty Johnson and some things that Venhuizen has handled in his position as director of policy and communications.

Jim Seward will join the Governor's Executive Committee, and continue in his role as the governor's attorney.

Seward, who spearheaded Daugaard's criminal justice reform plan, "is a trusted adviser and has really emerged as one of the leading voices in our administration," Venhuizen said.

Venhuizen and Sanderson also will serve on the Executive Committee, a team of officials who answer directly to the governor. The group also includes Lt. Gov. Matt Michels, Senior Adviser Kim Malsam-Rysdon, Chief Financial Officer Jason Dilges and Economic Development Commissioner Pat Costello.

The changes are effective following Johnson's departure on Friday. He announced last month that he was leaving after the midterm election to take a job in the private sector.