

## John C. Hesse

(23 Nov 1835 – 14 Nov 1929)

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**Hesse, John C.** On Thursday, November 14, 1929 at his residence, 506 A street s.e., John C. Hesse in the 95th year of his age. Services will be held at his late residence on Saturday, November 16 at 2:30 p.m. Interment in Congressional Cemetery.

*The Evening Star, May 26, 1918, p. 16*

### **Restores Honor Medal**

#### **Senate Passes Bill in Favor of John C. Hesse**

The Senate has passed a bill authorizing the Secretary of War to restore the name of John C. Hesse to the official medal of honor list and to the Army and Navy medal of honor roll, with all the rights, privileges and benefits thereof.

Mr. Hesse is a clerk of class 4 in the office of the adjutant general of the Army. A medal of honor was presented to him by Secretary Stanton personally in September 1864 “for distinguished gallantry and great personal bravery in preserving and bringing away the colors of the 8<sup>th</sup> Regiment, United States Infantry, after the capture of the regiment at San Antonio, Tex., in the month of April, 1861.”

Hesse was then a sergeant of Company A of that regiment.

Several months ago he was obliged to surrender his medal because the service for which it was bestowed was not of the kind specified in the statutes.

*The Evening Star, August 10, 1920, p. 13*

### **Leaves U.S. Service After Sixty Years**

#### **John C. Hesse, 85, Among Those to Be Pensioned by War Department**

John C. Hesse, who is eighty-five years of age and who has served continuously for nearly sixty years in the adjutant general’s office, War Department, is among the veterans of that department to be retired with a pension under the act of May 20, 1920.

Mr. Hesse began his departmental service as a general service clerk in November, 1862, and by successive promotions reached the \$1,800 class in April, 1864.

In July, 1902, he was appointed chief of a division at \$2,000 and has filled that position to date. Because of special efficiency, however, his salary was increased in August, 1917, to \$2,200, and a few months later to \$2,400.

Mr. Hesse was highly regarded by Adj. Gens. Ainsworth and McCain, and was entrusted by them with many important duties.

He treasures particularly a personal letter from Adj. Gen. McCain telling how much he appreciated his “loyal and efficient help” and adding that Mr. Hesse “was an inspiration to all who felt like falling by the wayside, and that, Mr. Hesse’s loyalty to the office was fine to see.”

Mr. Hesse is one of the very few civilians awarded the congressional medal of honor. Before he entered the War Department he was an enlisted man in Company G, 8<sup>th</sup> United States infantry, and served on the frontier of Texas against hostile Indians. Just after the outbreak of the civil war the 8<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment was surrendered by Gen. Twiggs to the Confederate forces in Texas. Private Hesse concealed the regimental colors and managed to make his escape with them to the Union lines, after many hardships and adventures. It was for that heroic service that he was awarded the medal of honor.

*The Evening Star, November 16, 1929, p. 9*

### **John C. Hesse Funeral Rites This Afternoon**

#### **Retired Government Employee Decorated With Congressional Medal During Civil War**

Funeral services for John C. Hesse, 95 years old, Civil War veteran and one of the oldest retired Government employes, who died at the home of his son, Maj. Edwin B. Hesse, former chief of police, 506 A street southeast, Thursday night, are being conducted here this afternoon at 2:30 o'clock, with Rev. John Weidley, pastor of the Lutheran Church of the Reformation, officiating. Interment in Congressional Cemetery.

Mr. Hesse held the Congressional Medal of Honor for escaping from Confederate soldiers during the Civil War and bringing his regimental colors back to Washington. Upon leaving the Union Army, Mr. Hesse was employed in the War Department until retiring about nine years ago.

*Military Review, Vol. XLI, Number 5, May 1961*

### **Corporal Hesse's Medal of Honor**

*Dr. Allan C. Ashcraft*

United States soldiers stationed at posts located in southern states faced a particularly delicate situation during the Secession crisis of 1861. A surprisingly large number of such troops were in Texas where almost one-third of the entire Regular Army was attempting to protect the southwestern frontier from Indian attacks. In Mid-February of that year the Texas Secession Convention assembled, approved an Ordinance of Secession, and adjourned while arrangements were made to have a popular vote on the question of disunion. To oversee state security matters during the election period, the Secession Convention appointed a watchdog agency, the Committee of Public Safety, to remain in session.

Two weeks after the convention adjourned, and two weeks before the Texans voted overwhelmingly to withdraw from the Union, the Public Safety group assumed the responsibility of demanding the surrender of all Federal military forces then in Texas. Basically, this included elements of the 1st, 3d and 8th Infantry, and the 2d Cavalry -- most of which were manning a score of scattered forts in western Texas.

### *Relief of Twiggs*

The committee found that a show of force by several hundred volunteers against the San Antonio departmental headquarters was sufficient to secure the surrender of Brevet Major General David Twiggs. General Twiggs, as commander of the Department of Texas, agreed to move his regiments to designated points along the Gulf of Mexico. There, Federal transport ships would pick up these soldiers and carry them back to United States soil. A few hours after this arrangement was made, General Twiggs was replaced by Colonel C.A. Waite as commander of Federal troops in the state.

During the next several months the regular companies withdrew from frontier posts and moved to evacuation sites on the Gulf. By early April it was estimated that the 1st of the Union troops would be clear of Texas by mid-July. This peaceful abandonment of the state was completely upset in late April, however, when the news arrived that Fort Sumter had been fired on and that war now existed between the sections. At this point Texas still contained a handful of regular companies awaiting transport vessels at Green Lake (near Houston), a half-dozen companies in remote western Texas being assembled into a column to undertake the march to the Gulf, and a skeleton crew handling administrative matters at San Antonio departmental headquarters.

### *Prisoners of War*

The coming of war had radically changed the status of these soldiers -- they were now enemy troops of a hostile power! The Confederate Government promptly initiated action to capture these men as prisoners of war. Colonel Earl Van Dorn, Confederate States Army, seized a lone Union transport ship nearing the Green Lake loading point and then with a force of Texan Volunteers, he surrounded and captured the stranded Federal companies. Later on 9 May, Van Dorn captured the exhausted United States column from West Texas as it finally drew to within a dozen miles of San Antonio.

#### *Hesse in Custody*

In the meanwhile, personnel composing the remnant of the departmental headquarters were arrested on 23 April by a Captain Wilcox and the "Alamo Rifles." Included in this headquarters group were Colonel Waite and assorted ordnance, medical, staff, and troop unit officers and men. A few days later all of the officers, except Lieutenant Edward Hartz (Adjutant of the 8th Infantry) were paroled and allowed to return to their homes until properly exchanged. However, the headquarters enlisted men, including Corporal John C Hesse (listed as being a member of Company "A," 8th Infantry) were retained, along with Lieutenant Hartz, in Confederate custody at San Antonio.

More than three years later John Hesse, then a civil employee at The Adjutant General's Office in Washington, D.C., wrote a letter to Lieutenant Colonel E.D. Townsend, Assistant Adjutant General. Hesse outlined his experience as a captive in Texas and asked that he be awarded a "medal of honor":

Washington, D.C., September 6, 1864

SIR: Believing that I am entitled to receive a "medal of honor," as provided by the resolution of Congress under date of July 12, 1862, to provide for the presentation of medals of honor to enlisted men of the Army and volunteer forces who have distinguished or may distinguish themselves in battle during the present war, I have the honor to make the following statement:

At the outbreak of the rebellion the headquarters of the Eighth U.S. Infantry were stationed at San Antonio, Tex. I was a corporal of Company A of that regiment, and detailed as clerk at its headquarters. On the 23d of April, 1861, the officers and a few enlisted men at that time at San Antonio were taken prisoners by the rebel troops under the command of Colonel Van Dorn. All the officers, with the exception of Lieut. Edward L. Hartz, adjutant Eighth Infantry, left a few days afterwards for the States. A few days subsequent, upon going to the former office of the regimental headquarters, the building being then in possession and under control of the rebels, I met there Lieutenant Hartz and Serg. Maj. Joseph K. Wilson, Eighth Infantry (now second lieutenant, Eighth Infantry). Our regimental colors being in the office, Lieutenant Hartz proposed to us to take the colors from the staffs, conceal them beneath our clothing, and try to carry them off. We did so. I took the torn color which the regiment had carried through the Mexican war, put it around my body under my shirt and blouse, and passed out of the building, which was strongly guarded by the rebels. Fortunately the rebels did not suspect what a precious load we carried concealed with us, for if they had our lives would not have been worth much. We put the colors in one of Lieutenant Hartz's trunks and next day left San Antonio for the North. On the route we guarded the colors with our lives, always fearing that the rebels might find out what we had taken away and come after us; but they did not, and we arrived safe with our colors on the 26th of May, 1861, in Washington City, and turned them over to the regiment.

Under these circumstances I think that I am entitled to the honor of receiving a medal, as I believe that Congress intended to award them to enlisted men who have done acts similar to mine. I therefore very respectfully request that I may receive one, believing that I have performed one of the highest duties of a soldier, having saved the colors of my regiment, and it will always be a happy day for me if I can see my regiment marching with their colors flying and can say, "That color I have carried on my body and have rescued it from the hands of the rebels."

I am, colonel, very respectfully, your obedient servant,  
John C. Hesse,  
Formerly Corporal, Company A,, Eighth U.S. Infantry,  
Now Clerk, Adjutant-General's Office

Col. E.D. Townsend  
Assistant Adjutant-General, Washington, D.C.

Hesse's facts were verified by Edward Hartz, the former 8th Infantry Adjutant, who had personally witnessed and participated in the events reported.

On the basis of this information, Assistant Adjutant General Townsend sent the following order to the Chief Clerk of the War Department:

War Department, Adjutant-General's Office  
Washington, September 10, 1864

SIR: The Secretary of War directs that you cause a medal of honor to be engraved for Corporal John C. Hesse, Company A, Eighth United States Infantry, for good conduct in saving the colors of his regiment from capture by the rebels in Texas in 1861.

Very respectfully, your obedient servant,  
E.D. Townsend,  
Assistant Adjutant-General

Mr. John Potts,  
Chief Clerk, War Department

In a subsequent report to Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, Colonel Townsend reported that as of the end of October 1864, the Medal of Honor had been awarded to 106 enlisted men who had "most distinguish(ed) themselves by their gallantry in action, and other soldier-like qualities." On an accompanying list of the recipients of this great honor, the fifteenth name was Corporal John C. Hesse.

Circumstances of the year 1861 called the Medal of Honor into being. By 1876 certain abuses, irritations, and embarrassments regarding the award of the Medal led to a reexamination of the basis for its issue. Brigadier General Alfred A. Terry, in his indorsement disapproving a large number of recommendations for the Medal growing out of the Battle of the Little Big Hon, wrote:

. . . That company commanders have recommended every man that behaved ordinarily well. . . . Medals of Honor are not intended for ordinarily good conduct, but for conspicuous acts of gallantry.

Subsequently, a board of officers reviewed the list of recommendations and in the course of its work laid down two principles that have become indispensable in governing the award of the Medal.

. . . Only such persons should be recommended for Medals of Honor as displayed in the discharge of duty a zeal, energy, and personal daring which far exceeded any just demand of duty. . . . The conduct which deserves such recognition should not be the simple discharge of duty, but such acts beyond this that, if omitted or refused to be done, should not justly subject the person to censure as for shortcoming or failure.

Section 12 of the Army Reorganization Bill, 3 June 1916, provided for a further review of past awards of the Medal. Between 16 October 1916 and 17 January 1917 a board considered the circumstances surrounding the 2,625 Medals of Honor awarded up to that time. On 15 February 1917 the board caused 911 names to be stricken from the list.

Medals awarded to Dr. Mary Walker and Buffalo Bill, along with Corporal Hesse's, were among those removed. No discredit was involved; through no fault of the individuals concerned it was determined that their cases simply were not in accord with the spirit and provisions of the act. Although Hesse's actions unquestionably were those of a courageous and dutiful soldier, he perhaps has achieved more lasting fame in becoming a victim to the vigilance necessary in preserving the supreme recognition that the Medal of Honor accords.

In 1918 Congress cleared away any inconsistencies of the legislation that had grown around the Medal. In so doing, it established by law that there were degrees of service to the country. Thus the Distinguished Service Medal, and the Silver Star, each lower in precedence, were created and became the base for the "Pyramid of Honor." The Medal of Honor stands today at the topmost point of this pyramid.