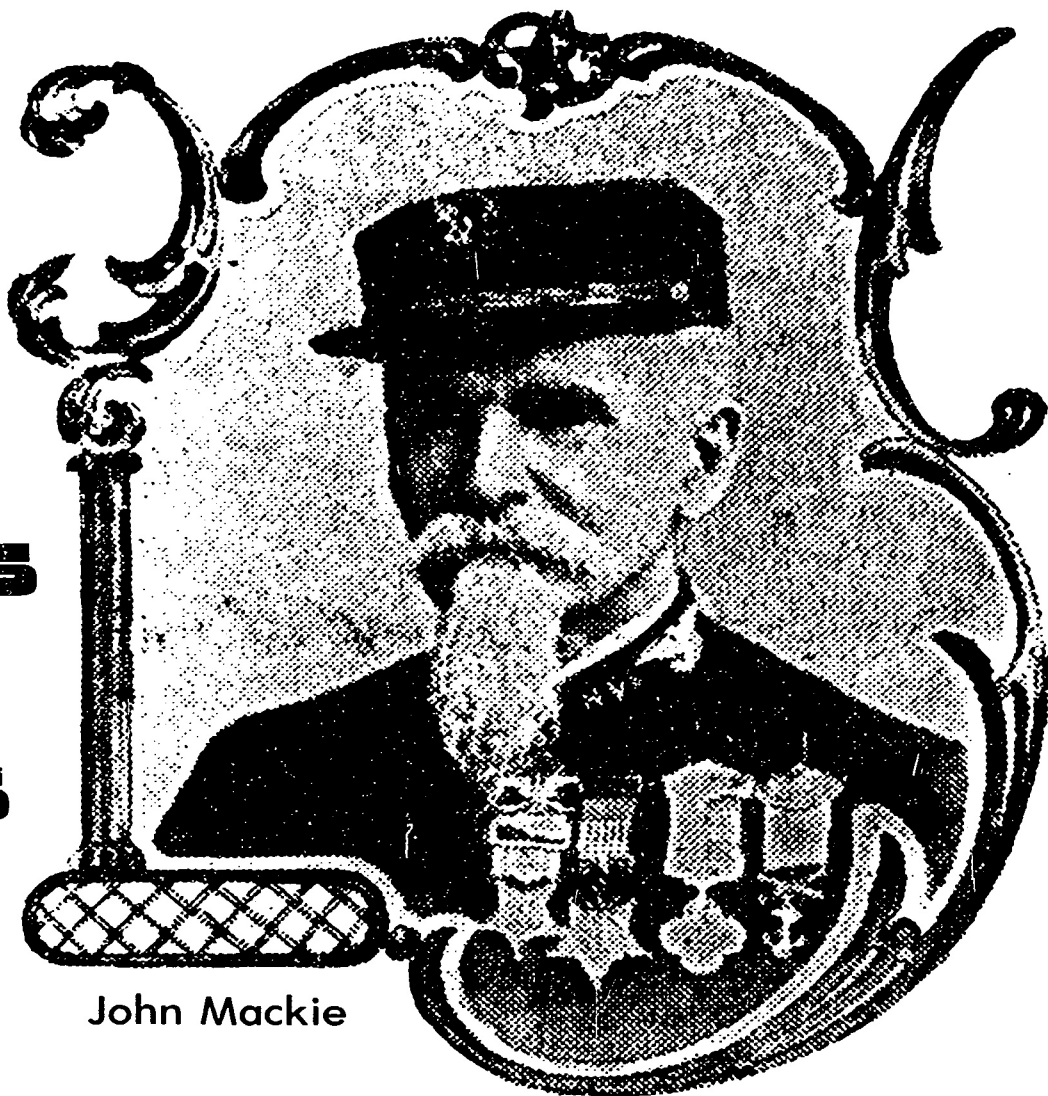
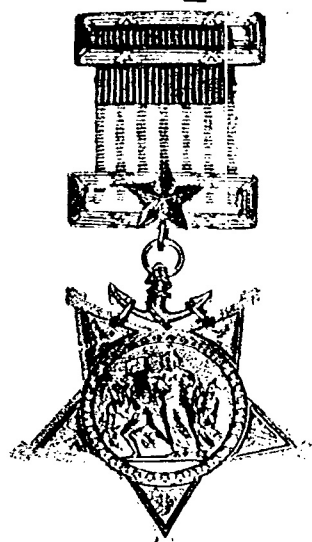


# Giants of the Corps



John Mackie

Story by Larry James

**O**n April 24, 1861, a 25-year-old native New York silversmith named John Mackie stood at attention in the Brooklyn Navy Yard to enlist in the United States Marine Corps.

Nine days earlier, President Abraham Lincoln had put out the call for 75,000 men following the surrender of Fort Sumter.

The Civil War had begun.

In a little more than four years the war would claim the lives of 493,349 Americans. For John Mackie, that April day was the beginning of four years and four months of honorable service, mostly as a member of Marine Guards aboard three U. S. ships-of-the-line.

The 5-foot-7, gray-eyed Mackie displayed a practiced penmanship as he inked the four-year enlistment contract and the accompanying oath of alle-

giance to the U.S. This allegiance—and his later devotion to duty—resulted in the presentation of the first Medal of Honor to a Marine.

*Although Mackie was the first Marine to lay claim to the Medal of Honor, 16 other members of the Corps were similarly honored during the Civil War. In the conflicts since then, including Vietnam, 291 Medals of Honor have been awarded to Marines. Of the 36,000,000 Americans who have served in the armed forces since the War Between the States, 3,385 have received this nation's highest decoration. Interestingly, almost half of the medals, 1,509, were awarded to Civil War veterans.*

*The laxity of requirements to earn the Medal of Honor during the Civil War resulted in 911 names being stricken from the records in 1917. The*



majority of these involved President Lincoln's decision at that time to award the medal to reenlistees of a few New England volunteer units. However, no names of members of the naval services were dropped. One famous American, William "Buffalo Bill" Cody, also lost his Medal of Honor recognition in 1917, along with the only female recipient—a Civil War surgeon.

Following his enlistment, Pvt Mackie reported aboard the USS *Savannah*. A year later, on the first of April, 1862, he became the Corporal of the Marine Guard aboard the USS *Galena*, the United States' second ironclad.

Among Northerners, the cry now was "On to Richmond!" which was viewed as the symbol of secession.

And, Cpl John Mackie was to take part in a four-hour battle in the Peninsular Campaign which most historians concede could have ended the war in May 1862.

Lincoln's Secretary of the Navy, Gideon Welles, had ordered ships at Hampton Roads to move up the James River in support of General George B.

McClellan's maneuvers against the Confederate capital.

Lincoln believed a major victory was imminent. Specifically, the President wanted the U. S. Navy "to proceed to Richmond and shell that city into surrender."

By May 12th, the ironclad frigate *Galena*, and gunboats *Aroostook* and *Port Royal*, were beyond the broad stretches near the mouth of the James. The small flotilla was joined by the gunboat *Naugatuck* and the famed ironclad *Monitor*.

The banks of the James began closing in as the river grew narrower about 20 miles below Richmond. Mackie later described the river as being "crooked as a ram's horn, with very high banks, heavily wooded on both sides, from which the fleet was constantly being fired on by Confederate sharpshooters hidden in the underbrush."

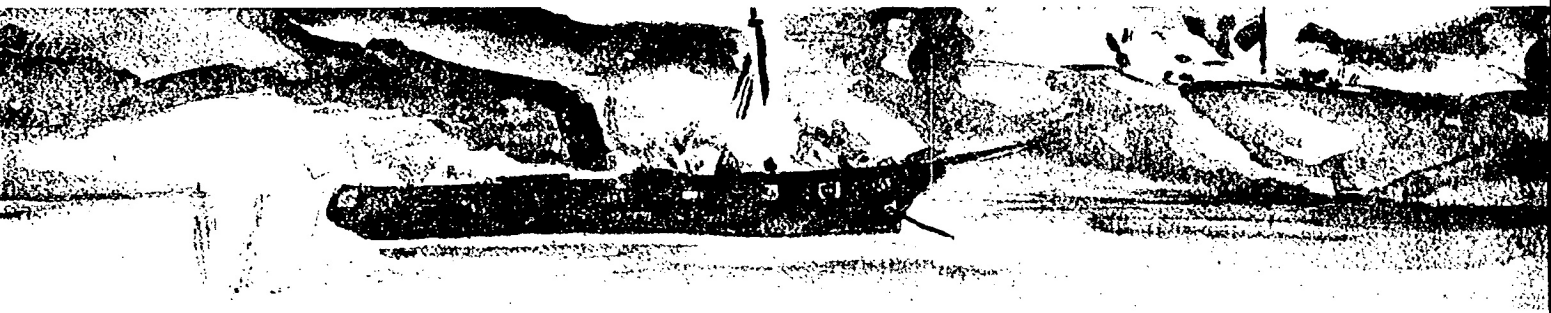
At this point the Union command lost contact with the flotilla. President Lincoln demanded to know about the progress. McClellan was concerned.

He was counting on the warships to support his drive for Richmond. On May 14th, he wrote the Secretary of War, "I have heard nothing of the James River gunboats."

But the Confederates knew where they were. Aboard the *Galena*, Cpl Mackie and his dozen Marines were busily engaging the Confederate sharpshooters in a moving rifle duel. Every foot of the James was being contested. When the ships arrived at the City Point landing, they found it had been burned and abandoned.

Early on the morning of May 15th, the Union force neared the last drastic turn in the James before the river straightened out—eight miles below Richmond. Atop the 200-foot Drewry's Bluff, ten-inch Columbiad guns in the Fort Darling emplacements were waiting for the Union force.

Little has been written about the 1,071 men who served in the Confederate Marine Corps, but they were manning guns on Drewry's Bluff as the ironclads *Galena* and *Monitor* steamed up the James River. The Marine



## GIANTS OF THE CORPS (cont.)

gunners had been moved to Fort Darling following the scuttling of the CSA *Virginia* (formerly the USS *Merrimack* before its capture by the South).

To the Northern leaders, the narrow confines of the James River seemed to have swallowed the U.S. Navy ships. The *Galena* led the way into the sweeping bend before sunken ships and submerged piles obstructed the way. She was within 100 yards of the ten guns atop the bluff and her 100-pound Parrot rifle and nine-inch Dahlgren guns couldn't be effectively elevated after she opened fire first. The Navy ships dropped back to 600 yards and anchored, with the *Galena* broadside toward the cliffs.

But the plunging fire of the Confederate gunners threatened to blast the fleet off the river. This was the final defense for Richmond.

The unarmored gunboats were in danger of destruction and the *Monitor's* guns still couldn't be raised high enough. The four dropped back and left the *Galena* to continue the clash alone.

Torn from stem to stern, she was taking a devastating pounding. The ironclad was hit 28 times by the big guns. Eighteen shots penetrated her armor and one passed completely through the double one-inch plates, separated by air space with iron bars. The ship suffered 40 percent casualties, with 13 men killed and 11 wounded.

Mackie later described the "sitting duck" situation following a direct hit: "Twelve men of the Marine Guard under my command and I were at the ports, taking care of sharpshooters on the opposite bank, and I barely escaped being struck by a ten-inch shot.

"As soon as the smoke cleared away a terrible sight was revealed to my eyes: the entire after division was down and the deck covered with dead and dying men.

"Without losing a moment, however, I called out to the men that here was a chance for them, ordering them to clear away the dead and wounded, and get the guns in shape. Splinters were swept from the guns, and sand thrown on the deck, which was slippery with human blood, and in an instant the heavy Parrot rifle and Dahlgren guns were ready and at work upon the fort.

"Our first shot blew up one of the casemates and dismounted one of the guns that had been destroying the ship."

A Confederate shell ripped into the boiler room. Another started a fire which the crew stamped out despite the raking enemy fire. Finally, after nearly four hours, the *Galena* limped down river, out of range. There were 132 holes in her and the port guns were shored up to keep them from dropping into the coal bunkers.

As the *Galena* slipped downstream, the defenders on the bluff climbed onto the parapets and gave a rousing cheer for the gallant attempt to reach Richmond.

Historians contend that if the Navy's request for supporting forces to land and capture Fort Darling had been approved, the war could have ended three years earlier.

The road to Richmond was wide open from Drewry's Bluff, with no defenses between.

Joseph P. Cullen concluded in "Peninsula Campaign 1862" that the war could have ended there. In Richmond, the Confederates' gold and silver bullion had been loaded, ready to roll, as the ships neared that sweep in the James. Hundreds had already fled the capital. According to Cullen, this included Jefferson Davis' family.

In a chapter entitled "A contrast of Generals: Fighting Lee and Politicking McClellan," Cullen stated that the leader of the Army of the Potomac was

afraid the Navy would get credit if the ships reached Richmond in support of his 100,000 Union soldiers.

Navy Captain John Rodgers, skipper of the *Galena*, later recommended Mackie for the Medal of Honor during a visit to the ship by Secretary of Navy Welles.

Colonel John Harris, Commandant of the Marine Corps, wrote to the *Galena's* commanding officer on November 5, 1862. Harris referred to a letter he had received from the Secretary of the Navy about Mackie's deed of valor and stated that he would endeavor to procure a Medal of Honor for his gallantry. At the same time, he authorized Rodgers to promote Mackie to sergeant as "...my means are very limited...to reward gallant conduct."

After noting a plan he had received from Cpl Mackie about shells to use against iron plates, the Commandant wrote, "As you have one more sergeant than your ship is allowed you will transfer one to Norfolk Navy Yard."

Sgt Mackie left the *Galena* on November 10, 1862.

By the time the Navy Department's General Order 17 was issued in July 1863, awarding Mackie the Medal of Honor, he was aboard the USS *Seminole* as Orderly Sergeant in Charge with the West Gulf Squadron.

Mackie received the Medal while aboard the *Seminole* in the fall of 1863.

Forty years later, he again wrote to the Commandant of the Marine Corps. By then, 1903, Major General Charles Heywood was CMC. Former Sgt Mackie asked if the general remembered an 1864 visit he had aboard ship just before the Battle of Mobile Bay.

Mackie asked the Commandant—in the 1903 letter—to assist in correcting his records in order to qualify for a \$100 gratuity being given Medal of Honor winners at that time.

"I have always had a suspicion," Mackie wrote, "that there was no official record at Headquarters of Marine Corps."

After several endorsements from the Navy Department, it was determined

that records of the award were on file in Washington, D. C.

Mackie's letter reflected the type of Marine he had been during those four years and four months, by adding:

"I never was on the sick list during my entire service...and was nearly killed suppressing a drunken riot in January 1864...one of the men, a fireman, hit me in the head with a chain hook, fracturing my skull, *which has never healed*, but I was on duty again the next day...."

The Corps' first Medal of Honor winner died in Philadelphia, Pa., in 1910.

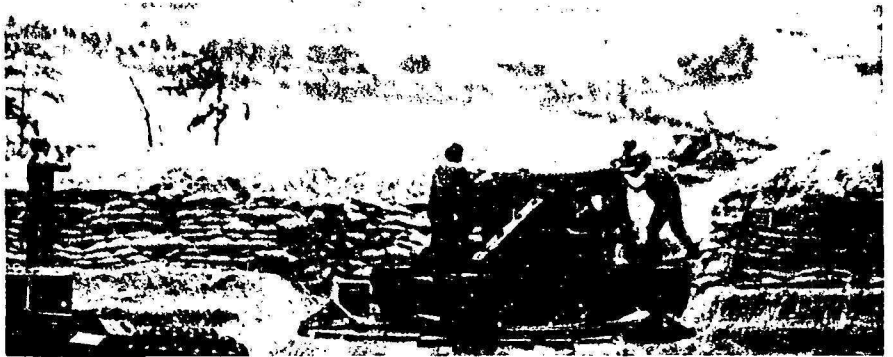


Photo by Larry James

Cpl John Mackie, the Marine Corps' first Medal of Honor winner, was cited for bravery at Drewry's Bluff in May 1862. A diorama of the battle scene is on display at the National Battlefield Park in Richmond, Va.



Photo by Larry James

A solitary Columbiad is now emplaced atop Drewry's Bluff at the Fort Darling site overlooking the James River where five Union ships failed in 1862 to reach the Confederate capital of Richmond.