

William Carney

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Harvey_Carney

February 29, 1840 – December 8, 1908) was an American Civil War soldier and the first African American to be awarded the Medal of Honor.

Biography

Carney was born a slave in Norfolk, Virginia, but escaped to Massachusetts like his father through the Underground Railroad. They later bought the rest of the family out of slavery.

Carney served with the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry as a sergeant and took part in the July 18, 1863, assault on Fort Wagner in Charleston, South Carolina. He received his medal for saving the American flag and planting it on the parapet and holding it while the troops charged. He was wounded three times, but recognizing the Federal troops had to retreat under fire, he struggled back across the battlefield, returning the flag to the Union lines. Before turning over the colors he modestly said, "Boys, I only did my duty; the old flag never touched the ground!"

With the primitive communications of that time, the flag was an important visual contact for troops. Many Civil War medals were awarded for protecting and displaying the flag under fire, or for capturing enemy flags. Carney was awarded the Medal of Honor May 23, 1900, nearly 40 years later. More than half such awards from the Civil War were presented 20 or more years after the fact.

In later life, Carney was a postal employee and popular speaker at patriotic events. He died in Boston, Massachusetts, and is buried in the family plot at Oak Grove Cemetery New Bedford, Massachusetts . Engraved on his stone monument is a gold image of the Medal of Honor