

Three Medals of Honor at Gettysburg

The Fourteenth Connecticut Volunteer Infantry

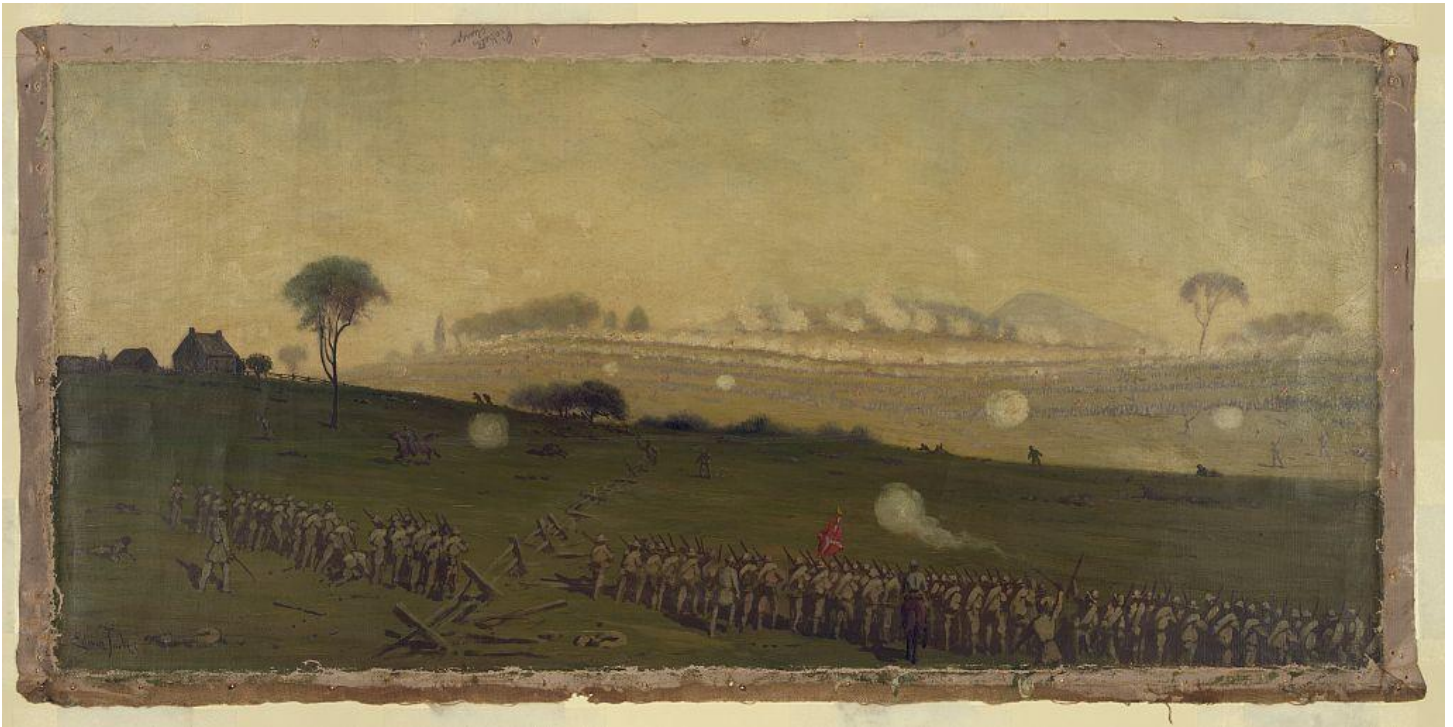
(Author's Note: My intent in preparing this article was to honor all three men of the Fourteenth Connecticut awarded the Medal of Honor for their heroic deeds on July 3, 1863. Major Hinck's story is the most familiar to those who know this regiment. The story of the other two men is often not elaborated on. In an attempt to allow the men who were on the line of battle that day to tell their story I have quoted extensively from the sources in the bibliography. Those remarks and those narratives are in direct quotes and cited in parenthesis with titles and page numbers. Where the narrative was condensed and summarized, those words are not directly enclosed with quotation marks, but the citation and page numbers of the sources are in parenthesis following the paragraph where the information was summarized.)

Carolyn Ivanoff, April 2012

In his 1948 novel, *Intruder in the Dust*, William Faulkner would write about the minutes before Pickett's Charge at Gettysburg on July 3, 1863.

“ For every Southern boy fourteen years old, not once but whenever he wants it, there is the instant when it's still not yet two o'clock on that July afternoon in 1863, the brigades are in position behind the rail fence, the guns are laid and ready in the woods and the furled flags are already loosened to break out and Pickett himself with his long oiled ringlets and his hat in one hand probably and his sword in the other looking up the hill waiting for Longstreet to give the word and it's all in the balance, it hasn't happened yet, it hasn't even begun yet, it not only hasn't begun yet but there is still time for it not to begin against that position and those circumstances which made more men than Garnett and Kemper and Armistead and Wilcox look grave yet it's going to begin, we all know that, we have come too far with too much at stake and that moment doesn't need even a fourteen-year-old boy to think This time. Maybe this time with all this much to lose and all this much to gain: Pennsylvania, Maryland, the world, the golden dome of Washington itself to crown with desperate and unbelievable victory the desperate gamble, the cast made two years ago.... ”

Facing the Confederate lines about a mile away were the boys in blue on the Union line. American boys like their brothers across the way. They too were waiting in the balance for it all to begin. Posted at the Angle, at the ready, was the Fourteenth Connecticut Regiment and three men of the Fourteenth who would win the Medal of Honor in the coming fury of the onslaught that both sides were poised for on that hot July afternoon.



Pickett's charge on the Union centre at the grove of trees about 3 PM by Edwin Forbes. This view is from behind Confederate Lines. Zeigler's grove is on the right and the copse of trees is on the left. The 14th Connecticut was to the right of Zeigler's grove at the Angle. Repository: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. 20540 USA

During the evenings of July 1 and 2, the boys of the Fourteenth had been on picket some two miles back, in the morning it was on provost duty and in the afternoon the Fourteenth was placed in its position in the 2nd Corps in support of Arnold's battery. During the morning, there were frequent skirmishes. (Croffut & Morris, 384, 386). The Bliss farm house and large bank barn between the lines were the focus of a brutal seesaw action. The farm house and barn lay between the lines of battle and became a no man's land that escalated from skirmishing to the fury of pitched battle until the buildings were ultimately ordered burned by Union General Hays. The buildings changed hands several times before they were captured and burned by the Fourteenth Connecticut. The *1891 Souvenir of the 14th Excursion to the Battlefield* claims, "This affair of the Bliss buildings was one of the most thrilling and perilous of the experiences of the Fourteenth. We believe it to have been the most notable episode connected with the doings of any individual regiment occurring during the great battle of Gettysburg. It occurred in clear sight of both armies on the wide plain extending between them, eliciting their eager attention and inducing many interchanges of artillery sparing." The *1891 Souvenir* is probably correct when it states: "Had the buildings been destroyed the first time captured by our troops many lives uselessly sacrificed would have been spared and much needless suffering avoided." (Souvenir p. 22)

To anyone who has walked the ground from the Union lines, across the Emmitsburg Road, to the Bliss markers between the lines it is astonishing how anyone engaged in such an action survived. Described in the *Souvenir* as "...one of the "fool things" of war.....In that brilliant sortie some precious lives went out, some cripples were made, and every man that escaped hurt (sic, unhurt?) came back panting and wearied and feeling that "out of the jaws of death" had he come."



Above: three views of the Bliss Barn site between enemy lines, from left to right: General Meade gazes over the Fourteenth Connecticut monument marking the regiment's position on the battle line, the Fourteenth Connecticut Bliss Barn marker from the front with General Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia monument within view in the background (the earthen mound marks the spot where the barn stood). The Fourteenth Connecticut Bliss marker from the back and the distance the survivors of the action had to make their way back under heavy fire to their own lines to prepare for the massive assault they knew was coming that afternoon. Photos, October 2010, Carolyn Ivanoff

“During the following two hours of mid-day, silence brooded over the field; only stretchers, the ambulances, and the surgeons were busy.” (Croffut & Morris, p. 386) “After the return to the ridge the men lay resting, or preparing their food, or penning notes for the anxious ones at home.” (Souvenir, p. 22) During this interlude a group of men of the Fourteenth gave their undivided attention to a fowl that Sergeant De Forest had acquired from the barnyard during the action at the Bliss farm. The Sergeant had made it back to the ridge and the Union battle line unharmed with the bird under his arm and had the chicken in the pot. The mid-day reprieve did not last long enough for De Forest to get his dinner as it was interrupted by the Confederate artillery barrage that would precede the coming attack. (Souvenir, p. 22)

“Suddenly the boom of a single gun broke the stillness; the shell came screaming over into our lines; and, before its echo died away, two hundred and fifty pieces of artillery belched forth in one tremendous roar. From almost every part of the concave arch of the rebel lines came solid shot and shell, chiefly aimed to dismount the guns along Cemetery Hill in the center. The Union gunners, undaunted, sent back a defiant reply from all the awakened artillery; and for more than an hour it was like the crash of incessant and loudest thunder. The solid earth trembled beneath the feet of the contending Titans; above and around was the smoke and crash of bursting shell, and on every hand came some sort of missile charged with death.” (Croffut & Morris, 386,387). “The wall in front of the Fourteenth was a simple affair, but the men crouched down by it as their only friendly shelter. Who can describe their feelings in their helplessness and apprehensiveness during the hour and forty minutes they lay enwrapped in the sulphurous canopy of smoke from our battery (Arnold's Battery depicted in Maps of Gettysburg, p. 251) near while the awful pounding went on! “...incessant discharge, their thunderous explosions threaded and tortured by the screaming, shrill screeching and snapping of the hurtling shells. The rock-based ridge throbbed under the mighty pulsations and the fields trembled with the jarring of the terrific storm. Closer crowded the men to the wall as the moments, such long ones, passed and there was no lull. They heard the cries of the wounded battery men and the agonized screams of the mangled horses, or the sudden swell-out of the exploding caisson's sound.” (Souvenir, p.25) Captain Broatch described it: “The air was filled with smoke so dense that objects could not be seen a distance of four rods. Some shell drove through the wall causing wounds and death. The strain upon the nerves as we lay hugging the ground while fragments of shell were dropping around us was great.” (Souvenir, p. 25)

Sergeant-Major Hincks, soon to capture the flag of the 14th Tennessee, was quoted in the regimental history as describing the barrage: “At about one o’clock there burst upon us most unexpectedly the heaviest cannonade I had ever witnessed. Without waiting for orders which could hardly have been heard, we advanced with one



Major William B. Hincks, photo
from the *American Civil War*
Research Database

impulse for a few paces and lay down behind the First Delaware men, who had taken our places at the wall. By the good providence of God, the enemy’s guns were pointed so that the shot mainly cleared us and went over the crest of the hill into the valley beyond, where, as we afterwards learned they supposed our troops were massed. Else it would seem that our little line by the stone wall, being built on a ledge of rock took those shot that fell short and bounded off instead of burying themselves in the ground beneath us and then exploding, tearing in pieces those lying above, as I know them to do in the grove further to our right. I mention these things on account for the singularly little damage we sustained from its terrific fire. One of the guns was directly behind me and at every discharge threw the gravel over me, and I could not only see and smell the thick cloud of burning power but could taste it also. I lay with my arm thrown over Eddy Hart and so hot was it that the drops of perspiration falling from my face made mud of the dusty soil on which we were stretched.” (Regimental History, p.149)

Today if you walk behind the Fourteenth Connecticut monument below the stone wall you can still stand on the solid rock ledge Hincks described as saving many of the men of the Fourteenth from certain destruction.



On Remembrance Day 2011, members of Company F, Fourteenth Connecticut at the stone wall behind the monument marking the position on the Union battle line. Pvt. Michael Adiletta is standing on the top of the solid stone ledge below the wall that Sgt. Major Hincks credited with helping to spare the regiment the effects of shell fire by forcing the shells to ricochet up and over the prone men on July 3, 1863. Photo 2011, Carolyn Ivanoff

After the barrage ended, Arnold's Battery, which the Fourteenth had been supporting withdrew, badly damaged. The Regimental History notes that "Deducting the two companies that were acting as skirmishers at the front and the killed and wounded in the destroying of the Bliss Buildings, the regiment now numbered about one hundred men. To occupy the space at the wall left vacant by the disrupted battery, it was necessary for the regiment to stretch out, leaving only one line. (Regimental History p. 151)

When the barrage finally ceased the men rose shakily from their positions on the ground. Major Ellis told them, "Now they mean to charge with all their infantry." As he placed his men in their slender line the cloud of smoke entirely lifted and the men looked across the fields. (Souvenir, p. 26) "All eyes were turned upon the front to catch the first sight of the advancing foe. Slowly it emerged from the woods, and such a column! Eleven brigades of Pickett's Division advancing obliquely upon the Second Division of the Second Corps,,,,,Major Ellis in his official report said, "It was magnificent." As far as the eye could reach could be seen the advancing troops, their gay war flags fluttering in the gentle summer breeze, while their sabers and

bayonets flashed and glistened in the midday sun. Step by step they came, the music and rhythm of their tread resounding upon the rock-ribbed earth.”(Regimental History, p. 151)

“Our men at once prepared for the struggle, piling a little the thrown down stones of the wall, emptying their cartridge boxes upon the ground for ready handling of ammunition and resting their rifles on the wall for steady aim; for seconds were precious and every shot must tell. (Souvenir, pg. 27)

“On and on they came and slowly approach the fence that skirts the Emmitsburg Road. Watchful eyes are peering through the loosely built stone wall. Anxious hearts are crouched behind this rude redoubt....positive orders had been given that not a gun should be fired until the enemy reached the Emmitsburg Road.” (Regimental History, p. 151)”

“No firing of artillery occurred until the front rank of the enemy was four hundred yards or more down the slope....The firing shattered the lines at the ends only, and these lines steadily closed up and pressed toward s the centre, keeping that intact and solid all the time. Our men saw but an undiminished, really increasing, array of a vast, moving hostile force, and knew that upon our infantry depended its defeat. As the rebel pickets on the line fell in with the advancing skirmishers our skirmishers on the front line rose and slowly fell back, firing into the faces of the foe. When the order was heard: “rally on the reserve!” they joined the latter and all fell back to the position on the ridge taking their places among their comrades—and now all the members of the little Fourteenth band were together, shoulder to shoulder ready for the supreme crucial moment, with tingling nerves and bated breath around them awaiting the onset. Hardly could they be restrained from firing when the enemy came near enough for their good rifles to reach them, but the strict order of General Hays had been announced that not a gun should be fired until the enemy should reach the Emmitsburg Road. ...The long range batteries had nearly all ceased their firing and a stillness supervened that made the sound of the enemy’s tread audible and the calm orders of the officers: “Steady men! Guide centre!” to come up as distinctly as thought delivered on dress-parade. Just after Archer’s line and Garnett’s lapped and the men of Virginia grasped the hands of the Tennesseans the fence was reached and simultaneously with it rang out at our brigade the order: “Fire!” “Fire!”

“Fire!!!”—and our rifles spoke in a volley so full, so well directed that the front line of the enemy mounting the fence seemed wiped away.” (Souvenir, p. 29)

“”Men dropped from the fence as if swept by a gigantic sickle swung by some powerful force of nature. Great gaps were formed in the line; the number of slain and wounded could not be estimated by numbers but must be measured by yards. Yet on came the second line in full face of the awful carnage...the shrieks of the wounded and the groans of the dying filled the air, but on they came meeting with the same fate as their comrades. The third line wavered and faltered...The color-bearers now advanced...attended by their color guards, planted their battle flags in the ground much nearer. Then the firing being too hot for them lay down waiting for their men to advance and rally round them. One of them in particular was in advance of the others and planted his flag not more than ten rods distant from and in front of the center of the Fourteenth.” (Regimental History p. 152) The Fourteenth was armed with Sharp’s breech-loading rifles and their fire was very



The 12th New Jersey Monument capped by the buck-and-ball shot that Hincks described them firing. The bronze plaque depicts the 12th NJ burning the Bliss Barn along with the 14th CT, Photo 2011 Carolyn Ivanoff

severe. Sergeant Wade remembered, “By this time the Fourteenth were all excited; they remembered Antietam, Fredericksburg, and Chancellorsville, and over the wall they went; nothing could stop them,

and soon they were fighting hand-to-hand with the rebels.” (Regimental History, p. 154)

Sergeant Major Hincks remembers, “at that time I was firing two Sharp’s rifles, which Lieutenant Hawley was loading for me; they belonged to men wounded early in the day, the regiment on our right fired buck-and-ball cartridges, and I think that I was in as much danger from them when I ran to get the flag as from the enemy.” (Regimental History p. 155, 156)

Major Ellis called for volunteers to capture the flag and instantly Sergeant Major Hincks, Major Broatch and Lieutenant Brigham leaped the wall. Brigham was shot down, Broatch and Hincks sped forward, Hincks faster than Broatch ran ahead yelling amid a storm of shot he seized the enemy flag and sped back to the line. It was the flag of the Fourteenth Tennessee Regiment and bore the names of twelve battles that the regiment had fought in. (Regimental History, p.154)

“The men now careless of shelter stood erect and with loud shouts continued to fire into the retreating army as long as they were within range. Many of the retreating column lay down behind stones and hillocks, and even the dead bodies of their comrades, to be protected from the Union shots. Presently, as by one common impulse, bits of white cloth and handkerchiefs were waved as signals of surrender. In response to these signals, our men leapt over the wall and advanced toward the retreating foe. When they reached the point where the enemy’s advance had halted rebel wounded and unwounded in large numbers rose up and surrendered themselves. One of the first to leap over the wall was Corporal Christopher Flynn of Company K who advancing far down toward the retreating enemy and snatched the flag of the 52nd North Carolina. Corporal E. W. Bacon of Company F also seized the flag of the Sixteenth North Carolina...Sergeant Major Hincks, Corporal Flynn of Company K and Corporal Bacon of Company F afterwards received the United States Medal of Honor for deeds of special bravery.” (Regimental History p. 156)

Major Ellis would state in his official report that the regiment captured five regimental battle-flags and over forty prisoners, and afterwards about one hundred more prisoners, some whom were wounded came into the lines of the regiment and gave themselves up. (Regimental History p.165)

Sixty-three men were awarded the Medal of Honor at the Battle of Gettysburg. The three men of Fourteenth Connecticut would be awarded the Medal of Honor as the result of close quarters combat on July 3, 1863 where each captured enemy colors. Due to the confused nature of that combat, Major Hincks capture of the colors of the 14th Tennessee was the most clearly witnessed deed of the flag captures by the regiment. Of the three men awarded the Medal of Honor that afternoon, two would survive the war, Major Hincks and Christopher Flynn.

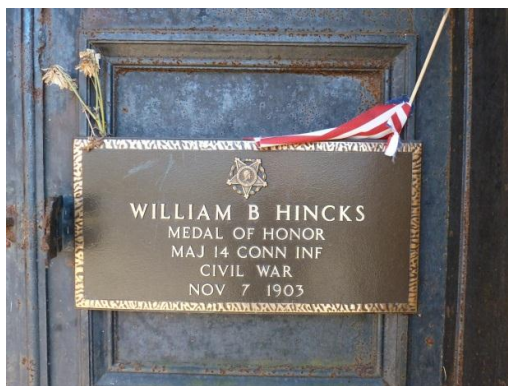
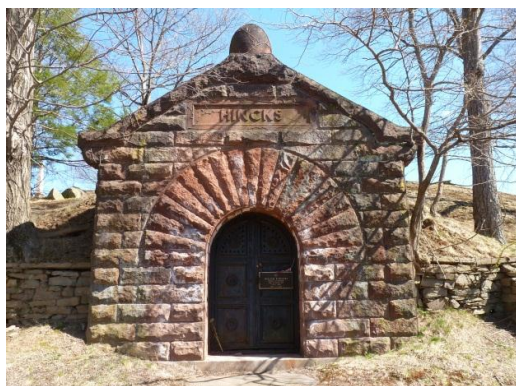
Elijah William Bacon, Company F, would be listed as missing in the Battle of the Wilderness. It was afterward determined that he had been killed in action on May 6, 1864. Corporal Bacon was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor on December 1, 1864. He was twenty-eight years old and his body was subsequently recovered and sent home to Connecticut to be buried in the Maple Grove Cemetery in Berlin, Connecticut. Bacon was born in Burlington, Connecticut in 1836. He had been married before the war to a girl from Madison, Angeline Shelly. Upon enlistment in 1863 at New Britain, Bacon gave his profession as stone carver. He was six-feet tall, with a light complexion, grey eyes, and dark hair. Private Bacon was court marshaled on May 25, 1863 for refusing to obey and order to assist in arresting certain individuals who were disturbing the peace and he was fined \$14.00. (*note: a private’s pay was \$13 a month*) After Gettysburg, Bacon would be promoted to Corporal in February 1864. That spring he would be killed in the Wilderness. (Charles Hanna, *Gettysburg Medal of Honor Recipients*, p. 153,154)

Christopher Flynn was born in Ireland in 1828. He came to the United States and settled in Sprague, Connecticut. When he enlisted in August 1862 in the Fourteenth Connecticut, Company K, he was thirty-three years old, over ten years older than the average recruit. He was promoted to Corporal in November 1862. During close quarter combat with the 52nd North Carolina, Flynn jumped over the low stone wall and struck down the color bearer of the 52nd and captured the regimental flag. Corporal Flynn was wounded May 10, 1864 at Laurel Hill, Virginia. Promoted to the rank of sergeant on March 1, 1865, he was mustered out of service on May 31, 1865. He died in October 1889 and is buried in St. Mary's Cemetery in Baltic, Connecticut. (Hanna, p.171-171)

William B. Hincks is described in the regimental history as born in Bucksport, Maine who moved to Bridgeport, Connecticut as a lad who abandoned his educational dreams to enlist in Company A, Fourteenth Connecticut. He is described as a man with strength of mind and purity of purpose, integrity of character, and frankness of manner who could not fail to influence his comrades and win their love and esteem. (Regimental History, p.157) Hincks enlisted as a private and rose quickly through the ranks of the regiment. On August 20, 1862 he mustered into "A" Co. Connecticut 14th Infantry as a private, promoted Sergeant in February, 1863, Sergeant Major in June, 1863, Adjutant, in October 1863 and Major in April, 1865. He was mustered out with his regiment on May 31, 1865 (American Civil War Research Database), having been in service from Antietam to Appomattox with the 14th Connecticut Regiment.

He was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor on December 1, 1864. His citation read: *During the highwater mark of Pickett's charge on 3 July 1863 the colors of the 14th Tenn. Inf. C.S.A. were planted 50 yards in front of the center of Sgt. Maj. Hincks' regiment. There were no Confederates standing near it but several lying down around it. Upon a call for volunteers by Maj. Ellis, commanding, to capture this flag, this soldier and 2 others leaped the wall. One companion was instantly shot. Sgt. Maj. Hincks outran his remaining companion running straight and swift for the colors amid a storm of shot. Swinging his saber over the prostrate Confederates and uttering a terrific yell, he seized the flag and hastily returned to his lines. The 14th Tenn. carried 12 battle honors on its flag. The devotion to duty shown by Sgt. Maj. Hincks gave encouragement to many of his comrades at a crucial moment in the battle.* (R.J. (Bob) Pfoft, Editor, United States of America's Medal of Honor Recipients, Fifth Edition, Pg. 897.)

Major Hincks returned to Bridgeport after the war and became a bank executive; he served on many corporate boards and helped P.T. Barnum found the Barnum Museum and Bridgeport Hospital. He also wrote about local history. He married Mary Louise Hart in 1866 and they had three sons. They lived in a house on Park Avenue and Prospect Streets that has since been demolished. He was a deacon in his church and involved in many community activities. Major Hincks died on November 7, 1903 at the age of sixty-two and is buried in Mountain Grove Cemetery in Bridgeport, Connecticut. (Hanna, p. 185, 186)



Vault of Major William B. Hincks, Mountain Grove Cemetery, Bridgeport, CT, photo taken April, 2012, Carolyn Ivanoff



Fourteenth Connecticut Regimental monument at Gettysburg, photo taken October, 2010, Carolyn Ivanoff

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