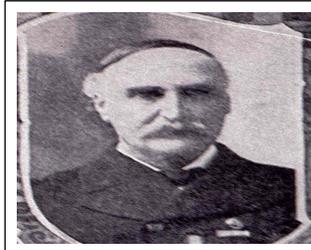


SYLVESTER D. RHODES

MEDAL OF HONOR

WHEN?
September, 1864

WHERE? Born
in Plains, PA.



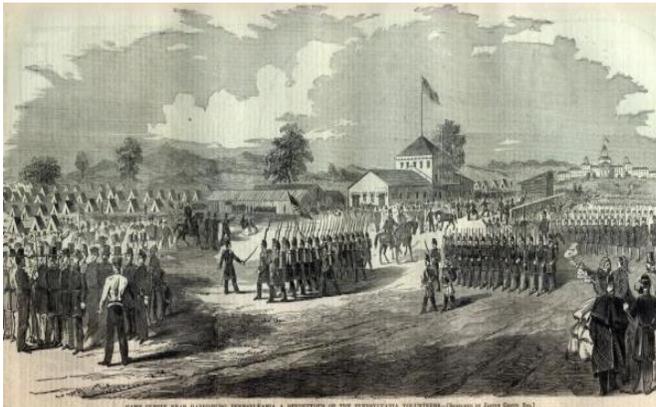
EVENT
Civil War battle of Fisher's Hill, Virginia

VOCABULARY
Cannon
Skirmish line

Born in Plains, Pa., in 1842, Sylvester Rhodes was 18 years old when the Civil War turned the country upside down as Confederate cannon thundered on Fort Sumter, South Carolina. After Lincoln's call for volunteers, Rhodes enlisted with the Wyoming Artillerists as a private in Company F of the 8th PA volunteers in 1861. By the time the war was over four years later, he was Captain of the 61st PA volunteers. Though he fought in more than 30 battlefield engagements including Gettysburg, Yellow Pine, and the Wilderness, it was at the battle of Fisher's Hill in Virginia where he was recognized for extraordinary bravery and awarded the Medal of Honor for his heroism.

Rhodes was the son of John and Mary Rhodes who had settled in Plains Township right outside of Wilkes-Barre. The area had strong ties to the Union so it was no surprise that young Rhodes joined the local Wyoming Artillerists a unit that had taken part in the Mexican-American war in 1848. He left that group (a 90-day unit) to join the Company L of the 23rd Pennsylvania

Volunteers made up of Luzerne County volunteers. He later transferred to the 61st Pennsylvania Company D in March 1862 (Grokopedia).



Since training camp at Camp Curtin in Harrisburg, Rhodes's leadership ability was recognized by officers who advanced him in rank from private to sergeant to second lieutenant and eventually to captain by the end of the war. It was at the battle of Fisher's Hill where his actions would be recognized with the Medal of Honor.

Following Camp Curtin, Harrisburg the year before, the Confederates were determined to keep the Yankees from advancing into the fertile Shenandoah Valley in August of 1864. The valley held farms that supplied the Confederates with food and also shielded the rebel army's movement as they moved south to north. The approach to the valley was through a narrow four-mile-wide gap and the rebels had both sides covered. In between Fisher's Hill rose up with Tumbling Creek just north of that. The entrenched rebel position looked unassailable.

Union commander Phil Sheridan knew the position had to be taken though Confederate commander Lieutenant Jubal Early's men were entrenched on either side. A frontal assault would

certainly have heavy casualties. Early had 15,000 men in August but now in September had about 9,500 while Sheridan had nearly 30,000. Some of Early's men had been taken for duty elsewhere, some were casualties. Early knew his flanks were too thin and planned to withdraw from the position on the 22nd. But it was too late. (A more detailed account can be found in Fold 3.)



The Union men kept quiet and undetected as they moved into positions in the early morning on the 21st. Knapsacks were stacked at the bottom of the mountain along with bayonets and scabbards. Anything flashy was left behind or hidden so their position would not be given away. The mountainous terrain—sharp rocks, steep inclines—was difficult to climb.

When the attack came, the Rebels were surprised. Some units stood their ground in places, but others fell back forcing a general Confederate retreat. Hand-to-hand combat broke out all over the line. When Sgt. Rhodes saw his men in trouble under heavy fire, he leaped into the trench leading the men on the attack. He captured a cannon and turned it on the Confederates. According to Grokipedia, “Rhodes inspired his comrades to press the attack.” Rhodes directed the cannon be taken back to the Union lines.

“I feel the success is due, more than in any battle I know,’ Colonel Wells wrote in his battle report, “to the splendid individual heroism of the men in the ranks” (Fold 3).

Before the war ended Rhodes had been given the bars of captain. He left the service on June 28, 1865 still suffering from the spinal wound he received at the battle of Yellow Tavern.

Rhodes went home to Plains and began working for the Wilkes-Barre Water Works as a line inspector. He retired in 1903 and died at his home in Plains Township a year later on Aug. 29 from progressive muscular atrophy. That condition was the result of a spinal wound he received at the battle of Yellow Tavern in Henrico County, Virginia, on May 11, 1864 (Times Leader). He is buried in Hollenback cemetery in Wilkes-Barre near two other Medal of Honor winners: Eugene Beaumont and James Rutter.



His Medal of Honor citation was mailed to him 33 years after the war. It reads as follows: "The President of the United States of America, in the name of Congress, takes pleasure in presenting the Medal of Honor to Sergeant Sylvester D. Rhodes, United States Army, for extraordinary heroism on 22 September 1864, while serving with Company D, 61st Pennsylvania Infantry, in action at Fisher's Hill, Virginia. Sergeant Rhodes was on the skirmish line which drove the enemy from the first entrenchment and was the first man to enter the breastworks, capturing one of the guns and turning it upon the enemy."

ONLINE RESOURCES

[Fold 3 Ancestry](#)

[Grokipedia](#)

[Times-Leader](#)