

Orderly Sergeant Christopher Nugent Medal of Honor Winner at Crystal River, Florida

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During the Civil War, the Navy and Marine forces played a key role in the conflict interdicting the flow of goods and supplies of the Confederacy. Their efforts helped to shorten the war. One of the Marines involved in this effort, Orderly Christopher Nugent, was awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions.

Nugent's service record shows he joined the Navy as ship's boy in 1854 at the age of 13. Born in County Craven Ireland, Nugent was fortunate to be with Commodore Perry when he made his historic voyage to open relations with Japan. In 1858 when he was old enough, he joined the Marines and served two enlistments as a Marine.

During the war, he was assigned to the *U.S.S. Fort Henry* a converted ferry boat which was part of the East Gulf Blockading Fleet. The shallow draft of the vessel allowed it to get into the shallow waters off the west coast of Florida. There, the ship's crew raided storehouses on shore, destroyed salt works that were essential in producing the salt for food preservation, and capturing blockade runners.

Florida was vital to the Southern war effort. Its many islands, creeks, rivers and secluded inlets made it an ideal place to conceal the sloops and schooners that took cotton, yellow pine, turpentine, salt and cattle to Havana and other ports in the Caribbean to trade for weapons, gunpowder, medicine and other material critical to the Confederate cause. It was along the steamy Gulf coast that the *Fort Henry* and its crew of sailors and Marines struggled to interdict the supplies and sink the rebel ships before they could complete their missions.

The Union Navy had the daunting task of curtailing trade between Florida and the islands but was hard pressed to provide enough ships for the task. Larger naval vessels could not come near the shore because of shallow water and reefs. This necessitated the use of shallow-draft and highly maneuverable vessels such as the *Fort Henry*. From the *Fort Henry* and ships like her, heavily armed patrols rowed longboats, cutters and launches into the mangroves and marshes that gave their enemy sanctuary. The patrols were generally forty-eight hours long. Raiders would search islands off the mouths of the rivers or wait to pounce on enemy ships as they worked their way through the reefs. Once spotted, blockade-runners would often run their ships aground to escape. They would scuttle their ships if they thought they might be able to return and salvage them, if not, they would be set ablaze.

Two members of her crew, the Captain, Brevet Lieutenant E.Y. McCauley and Marine Orderly Sergeant Christopher Nugent were the driving forces behind the successes of the ship. McCauley's aggressive pursuit of the enemy, and Nugent's successes leading boat parties conducting raids, earned the ship quite a reputation.

During the time the ship was on station with the East Gulf Blockading Squadron, it scored numerous victories. Official records show she captured five sloops, five schooners, and several smaller vessels. She destroyed others. Captured vessels were taken to Key West where they and their cargoes were sold. Crew members had a powerful incentive to capture enemy shipping; they received a share of the prize money.

Marines and sailors participated in several on shore raids, and several small boat actions, which included destruction of a two-gun rebel shore battery. Acting Lieutenant E.Y. McCauley assumed command of the *Fort Henry* on May 2 1862 in Baltimore, Md. He commanded the vessel until 23 November 1863 when he was promoted to Lieutenant Commander and transferred to the gunship, *U.S.S. Tioga*.

McCauley's aggressive pursuit of blockade-runners was recognized in a communiqué from Acting Rear Admiral Theodorus Bailey who wrote:

*"Sir: Since my last communication dated May 28 and numbered 186 the following prizes have been made by vessels of this squadron:
May 14—A flatboat, with 225 bushels of corn, by the Fort Henry.
May 22—Sloop Isabella, no cargo, by the Fort Henry.
May 24—Sloop Fashion, 49 bales of cotton, by the Fort Henry.
May 31—Schooner Echo, 125 bales of cotton, by the Sunflower.
June 1—A scow, 56 bales of cotton, by Fort Henry.
June 3—A lighter, 39 bales of cotton, by the Fort Henry and Beauregard.
June 6—Schooner Statesman, 50-75 bales of cotton, by the Tahoma.
June 13—Pushmatakaha, some loose cotton, by the Sunflower.
You will perceive by the above list that the Fort Henry has displayed much activity. The prizes made by her have been the result of boat expeditions which have been out constantly and which have been attended with enterprise and incident."*

McCauley's valor was also recognized in a later letter of commendation to Acting Lieutenant W. Budd written by Acting Rear Admiral Bailey. Bailey wrote:

"Sir: I am much gratified with the zeal you have displayed and the good judgment you have shown in the affair at Apalachicola, by which you so completely frustrated the plans of the rebels. It was this zeal in Lieutenant-Commander McCauley when he commanded the Fort Henry that made that vessel the terror of the coast for fifty miles."

McCauley kept his men busy working the islands around the mouths of the creeks and rivers along the Gulf. Rebel ships had to slowly pick their way through the shallow, reef-filled waters, which gave the men in the launches time to catch up. Quite often, they would act on intelligence reports from Unionist residents about incoming and outgoing vessels.

McCauley personally led one of the most grueling boat actions. With seven boats from the *Fort Henry*, the *Sagamore* and the *St Lawrence*, he attacked Bayport Harbor. The sailors and Marines of the raiding party anchored off the mouth of the harbor at one a.m. When dawn came, they put all their strength into rowing the two miles to attack. The tide was against them, and contrary winds slowed their progress, giving the Confederates plenty of time to move their ships from the outer harbor into the sheltered inner harbor except for a sloop and schooner. Part of the attacking force made their way towards the sloop carrying their boats across the flats at the mouth of the harbor. They seized the sloop loaded with corn, and set it ablaze. Meanwhile, the other boats engaged a two-gun battery and a company of riflemen dug into firing pits along the shore. The gun battle raged between boats and shore until a shell cleared the shore battery. Two of the boat howitzers ripped loose of the fittings during the battle. As the boats made progress toward the schooner, they saw the enemy had set it on fire, destroying the ship and the three hundred bales of cotton on board. Unable to go into the inner harbor to destroy other ships, they set off to hit other hiding places to the south. For the next five days, the men rowed under a blazing sun and rainsqualls for seventy-five miles in search of the enemy.

The second night, they rowed and baled all night when their small boat armada was hit with severe storms. Each time they put in to shore to search the Chassahowitzka River, Crystal River, Homosassa River, Withlacochee River and the Waccassassa River, they found that fast riders from Bayport had forewarned the locals. From there, they rowed out into the Gulf to rendezvous with the *Fort Henry*, and head back to the Suwannee River where they searched and destroyed navigation markers.

One of the most successful boat crews of the *Fort Henry* was the one commanded by Orderly Sergeant Christopher Nugent. After one engagement the *Fort Henry* captured a sloop and found it desirable to keep one of the boats of the sloop to add to their small boat force. This allowed them to increase the number of patrols. McCauley gave the boat to Nugent to repair and put to good use. He spoke highly of his skill and professionalism. McCauley wrote;

“Orderly Sergeant C. Nugent superintended the work with skill and zeal. On the 11th instant she was manned by 6 of the guard of this vessel and sent in charge of Sergeant Nugent to the Withlacochee with orders to watch for the appearance of the Frolic.”

On the June 15, 1863, Nugent and a small party reconnoitered several miles up the Crystal River. They did not find the *Frolic*; however, they did spot a log

breastwork. Not wanting to go back empty-handed, Nugent guided his boat ashore, left two men to guard it, and then attacked the breastwork with the four others, not knowing what force lay behind the wall of the fortification.

The Marines charged the fortification surprising the Confederates. The eleven rebels and one woman took off running for the swamp. Their commander fired his pistol, hitting the cap box on Nugent's belt. Nugent ordered his men to hold their fire. The official report of the action stated that order was given because *'his gallantry would not permit it as there was a woman among the fugitives.'*

The Marines gathered all the weapons in camp, loaded them into their boat, then destroyed the camp and all supplies. Several documents were discovered confirming that the *Frolic* was a blockade-runner and not a British ship despite the fact that she was often seen flying British colors. They also recovered orders for the crew of the *Frolic* to defend the fortification if attacked. Another document had the name of a sailor who had deserted from one of the *Fort Henry's* boat crews and had taken up with the rebels.

Nugent, Corporal Charles Myhan, and privates, John Gibbons, Patrick Coughlin, George Murphy, John Small, and James Stuart were all mentioned in McCauley's report to the Admiral.

The following month, Nugent and his crew were sent on a night reconnaissance patrol off Depot Key. During a storm that night, they rescued two men and a woman from a foundering rowboat. At first they thought the three to be rebels, but after questioning they learned that they were Unionists escaping for their lives. For this action, and for the raid on the fortification at Crystal River, Sgt. Nugent was awarded the Medal of Honor. Later, Nugent was transferred to the *U.S.S. Tioga* with his commander Lt. McCauley. He was later transferred to the Marine base at Portsmouth, New Hampshire, and finally to the *U.S.S. Vandalia*. He left the Marines on October 9, 1865.

Order for Nugent's Medal Of Honor

Nugent, Christopher
Orderly Sergeant, U.S. Marine Corps
General Order Navy Department No. 32,
April 16, 1864

"While serving on board the U.S.S. Fort Henry, was in charge of a reconnoitering party sent in to Crystal River, Florida, June 15, 1863, and displayed extraordinary skill, and discretion in driving a guard of rebel soldiers into a swamp, capturing their arms and destroying their camp equipage."

The author of this article is currently working to locate the exact site of Nugent's raid on the Crystal River. Ekardt believes he has found the site where Nugent raided the fortification.

Bibliography

List of Officers of the Navy of the United States and of the Marine Corps from 1778-1900

The Service Records of Christopher Nugent

The Service Records of E. Y. McCauley

The U.S. Marines in the Civil War, the First Year by David Sullivan

The U.S. Marines in the Civil War, the Second Year by David Sullivan

The U.S. Marines in the Civil War, the Third Year by David Sullivan

The U.S. Marines in the Civil War, the Final Year by David Sullivan

The Official Records of the East Gulf Blockading Squadron (Cornell University Collection)

The Marine Corps History Center

The Marine Corps Museum





No known pictures exist of the *USS Fort Henry*. This is the *USS Commodore Perry*, the same type of fore-and-aft ferry boat.



Dave Ekardt In 1860's Marine Uniform