This story began in the middle of January 1999, when I was on an extended business trip to New York City. Having only a few hours of free time during the workday, I had to plan my excursions to antique and coin stores during my lunch hours or on weekends. It was in one of these stores, in downtown Manhattan, where the subject of this article was obtained.

The few items I had selected, from among those out on display around the store, were at the owner’s desk. I really hadn’t seen anything that instantly grabbed my attention; only a few medals to fill in a gap or two. I talked briefly with the owner about my interest in medals and asked him if he had any exotic items that were not out on the shelves. He said, “I don’t know how exotic it is, but there is this one lodge medal. I’ll go get it.” He disappeared for a few seconds and emerged with a small gold-plated Maltese cross from the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR).

On the obverse, in cast raised letters, are the words:

GUARD OF HONOR TO PRESIDENT
CHESTER A. ARTHUR +
Dedication Day 1882

The reverse is engraved:

Reverse and Obverse of GAR Presidential Honor Guard Medal

As I looked at the medal that night, a list of questions arose about its owner and history. Who was Henry O’Brien? Where was GAR Post 80? What type of ribbon went on it? Did it have a top broach? Do pictures exist of him wearing it? Where do I begin?

For the next six months the medal laid around in my “to do” projects box, and it was only at the last minute that I decided to drag it to the 1999 OMSA Convention in San Jose. Most of the people I showed it to couldn’t help me, other than to say it was nice. Then at Yash’s table, a friend of his looked at it and got quite excited. He said, “This was an important person, to have been selected as a member of the President’s Guard of Honor. Have you checked the Congressional Medal of Honor Rolls from the Civil War?” I hadn’t. This was my first lead. I asked about the ribbon and was told it was probably a red, white and blue ribbon, made of a heavy silk blend of fabric, typical of the medals of the late 1800s, and the medal most likely hung from a top broach.

Once I returned from the convention my plans for researching the medal again quickly took a much lower priority. The medal was back in the “to-do” box with a few scribbled notes attached. Within six months however, it returned to the top of the priority list and
The next step was to see what I could find in the way of military records. I signed on to the Internet on my personal computer, and in the search field typed the letters “NARA,” for the National Archives and Records Administration. This took me into the computer files of the National Archives in Washington, DC. All Military Records for Civil War Veterans are located at the Archives. If you don’t have a computer you can write to them at the following address:

Old Military and Civil Records (NWCTB)
National Archives and Records Administration
700 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20408

You can’t get personal records or files over the Internet, but you can get the forms to request a search of their files.

Normally you can print the forms on your home printer. However, the form needed to search for Civil War records is a multi-colored form and has to be ordered. So, either request the form from the NARA in writing or order a copy on-line through their e-mail address. The form is NATF Form 80. The form I received was last revised in September 1997 and was only good until June 30, 2000. After that time the NARA either revised it again or replaced it entirely. By the time this article is printed there may be a new form.

In order to use the form with any success you must know some basic information about the individual you are researching: full name, branch of service, state where he served, the war he served in and if he was a Confederate or Union Veteran. I might add that this form is used for accessing Military records for the following: Army officers who served prior to June 30, 1917; Army enlisted service prior to October 13, 1912; Navy officers prior to 1903; Navy enlisted prior to 1886; Marine Corps officers prior to 1896; Marine Corps enlisted prior to 1905; any Confederate officer or enlisted; or any person who served in any force raised by the Federal Government from the Revolutionary War through the Philippine Insurrection (1775-1902).

In my case, I had more than enough information, so I quickly sent in the papers along with my credit card number for payment. Within three weeks, I received 77 documents covering O’Brien’s service in the Civil War. It was, to say the least, an eye opener. Included was everything from his father’s signed consent authorizing him to enlist, his medical records for wounds received, his discharge in 1865, and follow up papers into the 1890’s. It was a pretty accurate record of one man’s service.

Despite the information I received from the National Archives, there were still gaps in his life and military service. I took a chance and signed onto the Internet again and entered “First Minnesota Infantry”—the regiment he served in during the Civil War. Bingo. I got into a very valuable source, the Web page for the First Minnesota Volunteer Infantry Regiment, maintained by Charles Barden. This site listed the full names, dates of enlistment, deaths, etc., for members of the regiment. It also gave a history of the regiment and provided me with the name of a book, *The Last Full Measure, The Life and Death of the First Minnesota Volunteers* by Richard Moe, a narrative history of the unit.

In addition, I sent an e-mail to Mr. Barden, and he was able to provide me with additional documentation: a copy of O’Brien’s Obituary, articles written about him during and after his life, photos of him, and much more. In the late 1880s, there was a movement undertaken to get Henry O’Brien the Medal of Honor. For recognizing acts performed during the Civil War, Congress required gallant and meritorious conduct on the field of battle. The conditions necessary for award of the medal were that the soldier must have performed four separate and distinct acts of bravery on the field, and the facts must be supported by affidavits of at least two of his comrades. Mr. O’Brien performance during the Civil War more than filled the bill.
In December 1889, William Lochren, a Judge of the 4th District in Minneapolis, and a Lieutenant during the war, submitted a detailed affidavit on O'Brien's actions during the third day of battle at Gettysburg. While the information provided a good history of O'Brien's service, it also cast a shadow on his service during the first year of the war. More research will be needed to clarify some points; however, I have a good idea about the man, his service and his medal.

Henry D. O'Brien was born in Calais, Maine, on January 1, 1843, to Wetmore O'Brien. His mother's name was not listed in any of the information I have thus far gathered. In 1855 his family was one of the pioneer families to move into Minnesota. They settled in the area of St. Anthony, a suburb of Minneapolis. He had three brothers and a sister. More information is available in a family history that was written by one of his brothers. O'Brien grew up in the St. Anthony area until the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861.

The unit he was to eventually join, the First Minnesota Volunteer Infantry Regiment, was one of the first units organized after President Lincoln's call for 75,000 troops in April 1861. The regiment was quickly filled with enthusiastic men from all parts of Minnesota and was one of the few regiments that received training by a qualified officer, Colonel Willis Gorman. Gorman was later wounded and left the Army on October 1, 1861. The men from O'Brien's hometown formed the St. Anthony Zouaves. The regiment's uniforms were unique. They wore "red" jackets or shirts for enlisted, "blue" jackets or shirts for officers, black trousers and black hats. By July of 1861, the unit had been sent east and had fought with distinction in the first battle of Manassas or Bull Run. After the Confederate victory it quickly became apparent to both sides that the war was not going to be a short one.

Undoubtedly the young O'Brien pleaded with his parents for permission to join the Army and fight with the Minnesota Volunteers.

The first document among his papers was a handwritten note from his father and witnessed by his brother. It read:

"This is to certify that I give my full consent to my son Henry D. O'Brien to enlist in the service of the United States first regiment of Minnesota Volunteers now stationed in State of Maryland.

St. Anthony Sept 2, 1861

Wetmore O'Brien

Frank O'Brien Witness"

On September 28, 1861, O'Brien went to an induction center near St. Anthony Falls, in downtown Minneapolis, presented his authorization paper, and enlisted for 3 years. That afternoon he was mustered into service at Fort Snelling, Minnesota, as a private in Company E. He was 18 years old.

By October 1861, he had been issued a uniform, briefly trained, and sent to join his unit, then stationed in the Maryland suburbs of Washington, D.C. Within a month of joining, he would take part in his first engagement with the enemy at Ball's Bluff, Virginia, on October 21, 1861. The muster rolls provided from the National Archives indicate he was "present" for September and October of 1861. However, the muster rolls for the next eight months list him as "not stated" and he doesn't show up again as "active" until July 1862.

I searched the records placing them in chronological order to try to piece it all together. Then I found it, the reason for the missing rosters. In the "Remarks" area on the company muster-out roll, dated July 14, 1865, it read:

"Promoted to Capt. from 2nd Lieut. [when] Vice Farwell resigned. Transferred from "B" Co. April 10 '65. This soldier [O'Brien] was a prisoner of war at Andersonville, Ga, two months, Florence, S.C., six months, and is entitled to three months extra pay."

I thought I had the answer, but to make sure I signed onto the Internet and searched for "Andersonville."

I discovered a database that contained the names of 32,000 men who were imprisoned there during the Civil War; however, the name of Henry O'Brien was not among them. It is possible that some names could be missing from the prisoner rolls at Andersonville. A possible reason for O'Brien's absence from the rolls is that he was only there two partial months.