

Medal of Honor: Captain Thomas W. Custer, First Double Recipient

Thomas W. Custer was six years younger than his famous brother, George Armstrong Custer. The 16-year-old Thomas enlisted in September 1861 as a private in the 21st Ohio Volunteer Infantry. In spite of his humble beginnings, Thomas Custer distinguished himself in battle twice, for which he received two Medals of Honor.

With the 21st Ohio, Custer participated in major Western Theater action including the battles of Stone's River, Chickamauga, Chattanooga, and the Atlanta Campaign. A capable young soldier, he obtained duty on the staff of Major General James Negley in April 1863. He remained in this position until mustering out in October 1864.

Seeking further military service, Custer reenlisted, earning a promotion to second lieutenant. He also transferred to the 6th Michigan Cavalry, which served in Virginia. In the Eastern Theater, Thomas worked hard for his brother, Brigadier General George Custer, on staff in the Shenandoah Valley. He fought bravely at Waynesboro, Dinwiddie Courthouse, and Five Forks--which led to a battlefield promotion to brevet major.



*Custer wearing two Medals of Honor, c.1875.
Mead Army Museum, Amherst College.*

During an engagement at Namozine Church on April 3, 1865, Custer captured a Confederate flag. For this he received the Medal of Honor Three days later, Custer again demonstrated his valor at the Battle of Sailor's Creek. Astride his horse, Custer leapt over enemy works to capture two color standards. He was wounded in his face and his horse was shot out from under him. For this, Custer received a second Medal of Honor--the first of nineteen men so honored.

In the Civil War, regimental flags, or colors, were of great military significance. They played a role in guiding troop movements amid the chaos of battle. The loss of a flag meant troop confusion, disarray, and the potential for taking friendly fire. Also, the communities from which the regiment originated often paid for the flags, so they symbolized local pride and sentimentality for the soldiers. As flag capture meant low morale and shame, Custer's double-flag capture took the honor of two enemy regiments.

Custer continued his military career after the Civil War. In 1866, commissioned as first lieutenant in the 7th U.S. Cavalry, he fought in the Dakota and Montana territories. Promoted to captain in 1875, he took command of Company C. By this time he and his brothers, George and Boston (b. 1848), all served in the 7th Cavalry. Their fates were united to the end. Following the Battle of Little Big Horn on June 25, 1876, the bodies of the three Custer brothers were found near one another. Thomas was initially buried on

the battlefield, but in 1877 his remains were reinterred in Fort Leavenworth National Cemetery, Kansas.

Six two-time Medal of Honor recipients are buried in VA National Cemeteries:

- Captain Thomas W. Custer, Fort Leavenworth National Cemetery (Section A, Grave 1488)
- Coxswain John Cooper, Cypress Hills National Cemetery (Section 2, Grave 5022)
- Sergeant Major Daniel Daly, Cypress Hills National Cemetery (Section 5, Grave 70)
- Captain William Taylor, Loudon Park National Cemetery (Section OFF, Grave 16)
- Captain of the Hold Louis Williams, Cypress Hills National Cemetery (Section 6, Grave 12616)
- Sergeant William Wilson, San Francisco National Cemetery (Section WS, Grave 527)



Custer's headstone at Fort Leavenworth National Cemetery, Kansas.