



## THE YOUNGEST NCO

# SGT. JOHN CLEM

## This Month In NCO History

### September 20, 1863 — The Youngest NCO Earns His Stripes

*By Pablo Villa — NCO Journal*

**I**n the waning hours of the Battle of Chickamauga, a Confederate colonel on horseback happened upon a 12-year-old boy in a Union uniform lugging a sawed-off rifle.

It was a muggy afternoon Sept. 20, 1863. Union forces were hastily retreating after their failed campaign to force the Confederates out of Chattanooga in the region along the Chickamauga River in northwest Georgia and southeastern Tennessee. With the Confederates in hot pursuit, young John Clem — one of 10,000 Soldiers younger than 18 who served in the Union Army — was separated from a fleeing group and could hear a horse approaching from behind.

“Drop that gun,” barked the Confederate officer atop the horse before demanding Clem’s surrender.

Clem calmly turned around and raised his rifle. He quickly shot the colonel off his horse before sprinting

back to the safety of Union lines. The act was the culmination of a series of impressive feats showcased by the drummer boy of the 22nd Michigan Infantry. During the two-day Battle of Chickamauga, Clem was said to have ridden an artillery caisson to the front and wielded a musket trimmed to his size to fight Confederate troops in hand-to-hand combat. Despite losing the battle, Union officers promoted Clem to the rank of sergeant, making him the youngest Soldier to be a noncommissioned officer in the U.S. Army.

Though newspaper articles of the time reported Clem’s actions during the battle, there are no Confederate records of a colonel being wounded. Nonetheless, Clem was later decorated for his actions by then-Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase, who would go on to become chief justice of the United States.

A month after the Battle of Chickamauga, Clem was captured by Confederate cavalrymen in Georgia. Confederate newspapers used his age for propaganda purposes, illustrating how desperate the Yankee cause was “when they have to send their babies out to fight us.” Clem returned to the Union Army through a prisoner exchange and fought with the Army of the Cumberland until he was discharged in September 1864.

Clem was born Aug. 13, 1851, with the surname Klem in Newark, Ohio. He ran away from home at age 9 after the death of his mother. Not much is known about Clem’s actions between then and the time he was allowed to enlist in the 22nd Michigan in 1863, though he was reportedly allowed to tag along with the unit when it was mustered into service in August 1862. A popular Civil War song, “The Drummer Boy of Shiloh” by William S. Hays, was written for Harpers Weekly after the Battle of Chickamauga. It was reportedly inspired by Clem.

After the Civil War, Clem graduated high school in 1870 in Ohio. A year later, after failing the entrance exam to the United States Military Academy, he was

appointed second lieutenant in the 24th Infantry Regiment by President Ulysses S. Grant. Clem was promoted to first lieutenant in 1874.

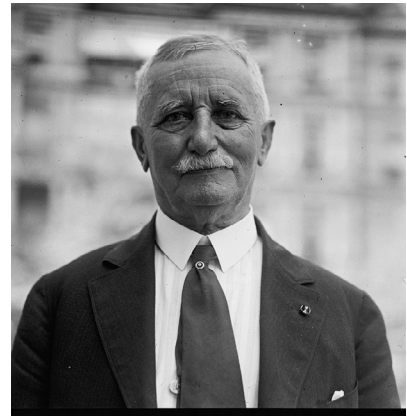
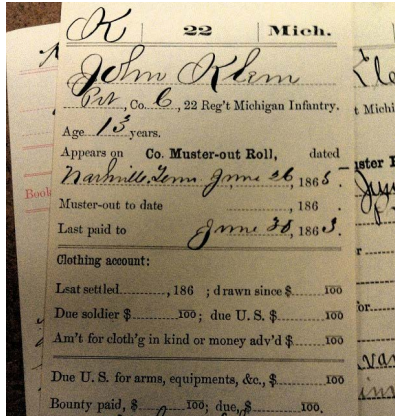
In 1875, Clem successfully completed artillery school at Fort Monroe, Va., and was sent to the Quartermaster Department, where he was promoted to captain in 1882. He spent five years as chief quartermaster at Fort Sam Houston, Texas, before retiring in August 1915 at age 64 and after 45 years of service. As was customary for American Civil War veterans who retired at the rank of colonel, Clem was promoted to brigadier general. Clem was the last Civil War veteran to serve in the U.S. Army. On Aug. 29, 1916, he was promoted to the rank of major general while on the retired list.

Clem married twice. His first marriage, with Anita Rosetta French, came in 1875. After her death in 1899, Clem married Bessie Sullivan in 1903. The couple had three children. Clem died in San Antonio on May 13, 1937. He was 85. The youngest NCO in the history of the Army is buried in Arlington National Cemetery. ■



John L Clem (Photos Courtesy the U.S. Army Military Institute)





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