

This Month in NCO History: Oct. 1, 1863 — Saving Sherman's March to the Sea

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Sgt. Joseph Keen, Medal of Honor recipient. (U.S. Army photo)

Sgt. Joseph Keen was severely fatigued and mentally exhausted after having spent nearly a year as a Confederate prisoner of war. When he managed to flee his captors Sept. 10, 1864, near Macon, Georgia, he began his trek back toward Union lines believing his chapter in the story of the Civil War was complete.

Little did Keen know he would earn a place in the grand annals of Army history as a recipient of the nation's highest military honor.

Keen was part of D Company, 13th Michigan Infantry, when it took part in the Battle of Chickamauga on Sept. 18-20, 1863. The Union offensive in southeast Tennessee and northwest Georgia was successfully repelled by Confederate forces and ended with nearly half of the 13th's 217 Soldiers listed as killed, captured or missing. Keen, who was wounded during the battle, was among those taken prisoner. He spent most of the next year being shuffled between Confederate prisons in Virginia and Georgia before ending up in Macon.

During his time in captivity, Keen kept tabs on the Union's movements as news poured in from other Soldiers who were subsequently imprisoned with him. He learned that the 13th was actively engaging Confederate Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest's forces across Tennessee and was poised to join famed Union Gen. William T. Sherman in Georgia.

Keen took that news with him when he escaped near Macon. Some days and many miles northwest after his flight from captivity, Keen observed the movement of Confederate forces led by Gen. John Bell Hood and numbering about 40,000 crossing the Chattahoochee River in an attempt to flank Sherman's army from the rear near Atlanta. Hood had already ceded the city to Sherman the previous month. Now, he was charged with trying to cut off Union communication between Atlanta and Chattanooga. Keen observed the opening stages of that strategy. That's when he made a fateful decision.

Alone, unarmed and with scores of Confederate forces between him and the future Georgia capital, Keen began a bold march toward Atlanta. According to his Medal of Honor citation, Keen managed to walk undetected through Confederate marching columns, camps and pickets before reaching Union lines near Atlanta on Oct. 1. He relayed news of the Confederate movement to Gen. Hugh J. Kilpatrick. The development furthered Sherman's objective as it removed opposing forces in his planned path to Savannah, Georgia. Sherman noted, "If he [Hood] will go to

the Ohio River, I'll give him rations. ... my business is down south."

Instead of marching out to meet Hood with his army, Sherman sent Maj. Gen. George H. Thomas to take control of Union forces in Tennessee and coordinate the defense against Hood, while the bulk of Sherman's forces, which by November included Keen and the 13th Michigan Infantry, began the March to the Sea — the Savannah campaign that destroyed much of the South's physical and psychological capacity to wage war.

That effort was spurred along, in part, by Keen's brave undertaking. He was awarded the Medal of Honor on July 31, 1899, for his actions.

Keen was born July 24, 1843, in Stanford in the Vale, Oxfordshire, England. It is unknown when he arrived in the United States. He enlisted as a private in the 13th Michigan Infantry on Feb. 1, 1862. He was promoted to corporal Aug. 31 of that year and earned his sergeant stripes April 1, 1863.

After his time in the Army, Keen spent his years as a farmer and an officer of the Detroit Oak Belting Co. He died Dec. 3, 1926, of heart disease. He was 83. Keen is buried in Elmwood Cemetery in Detroit.