

# MOH Recipient William J. Crawford

The grizzled, old blacksmith from Pueblo, Colorado shifted his feet uncomfortably. He felt out of place enough as it was, standing before a crowd of soldiers to face no less than a two-star general. The date was May 11, 1944 and Mr. Crawford had been summoned to Camp Carson, Colorado for a special occasion. It was not a happy occasion, but it was a ceremony the man who had already tasted grief far too often could not avoid.

"Your son was a hero," Major General Terry Allen said to the father that struggled to keep tears that formed in his eyes from falling across his cheeks. Then, slowly the general began to read the official citation that detailed the heroism of George Crawford's son, Bill.

On September 13th, just nine months earlier, Private Bill Crawford had been serving his Nation as a member of the 36th Infantry Division in Italy. He had landed with the unit at Salerno and moved inland as Allied Forces began the drive to liberate the European continent from the evil and deadly grip of the Nazi regime. "On that September day," Major General Allen read, "Private Bill Crawford demonstrated the highest degree of valor...and sacrifice."

As his platoon had moved up a hillside, an enemy machine-gun nest began to rain death around Crawford's fellow soldiers. It was a desperate situation, a crisis that demanded a man of character, and Private Bill Crawford was that man. Without orders, he jumped to his feet and charged forward, ignoring the bullets that flew around him. Moving up the hill, Private Crawford advanced to within a few yards of the enemy, threw a grenade into the pit from which they were firing at the American soldiers, and in so doing had saved his platoon. Again the American forces could advance.

The advance was short lived. This time it was not one, but two, separate machine gun nests firing at them from both the left and the right. And again, it was Private Crawford who stepped forward to save the platoon. First he attacked to the left, destroying the gun that threatened his comrades. Without pause, he shifted his attack to the right, knocking out the second enemy emplacement, then turning the captured machine-gun on the now routed and fleeing German soldiers. Again the platoon advanced, and fought throughout the day. Then, as darkness fell, the men of Crawford's 3d Platoon, Company I, 3d Battalion, 142d Infantry pulled into a defensive position for the night. Those who were alive, marveled at the fact that they had survived the viscous fighting of the day. All knew they were alive because of the heroism of Private Bill Crawford. None could find the fearless soldier to thank him...Private Crawford was no longer among them...his body lying somewhere in the darkness on the field of battle. Unable to otherwise express their thanks and admiration for the hero of the 3d platoon, the soldiers did the only action left to them, submitting their fallen hero for the Medal of Honor.

The posthumous award of the Medal of Honor to Private William John Crawford had been quickly approved, and Major General Allen presented the small star-shaped symbol of the highest degree of valor to a grieving father at the military post just 30 miles from young Bill's hometown of Pueblo, Colorado. Slowly the elder Crawford stretched his work-hardened hands forward to graciously accept the award that, though prestigious, would never replace the son he had lost. "Perhaps," George Crawford thought to himself, "I should have spent more time with Bill while I had the chance. Now, that opportunity is lost forever." As he turned away, no longer could the tears be restrained. So he slowly walked away alone, hiding them in his solitude.

Private William Crawford was happy to be home, happy to be away from war, and for a time he was happy to be a civilian. He returned to modest accolades in his hometown, where he preferred to be just another "ordinary" citizen. He met and married Eileen, and began a family that would eventually spread his love to two children of his own. Then, he returned to military service, much of it as an Army recruiter in his home town of Pueblo, Colorado.

In 1958, Bill Crawford was one of the Medal of Honor recipients selected to participate as the honor guard for the burial of the Unknown Soldiers of World War II and Korea. Everyone knew that Bill Crawford had the Medal of

Honor, and the award itself had been transferred to him by his father upon his return. But when Bill Crawford retired from the United States Army in 1967, he was one of the few men in history to wear the award without having ever formally received it. It had been presented posthumously to his father.

It was upon his retirement that Bill Crawford built, with his own hands, a large but modest house in the small community of Palmer Lake, Colorado. From there it was a short commute to the Air Force Academy, where he performed his duties as a janitor. Everyone knew Bill and Eileen Crawford, and everyone who knew them came to love them. Few people ever knew however, the true measure of the man. Even in a community as small as Palmer Lake, most residents didn't know that the man who lived down the street was one of the great heroes of American history.

Such awards cannot go unnoticed, however, at a military institution like the U.S. Air Force Academy. Every spring, Bill Crawford would pull his Army Dress Blues out of the closet and drive the short distance to the Academy to present the "Outstanding Cadet" award to a member of the graduating class. Seventeen years after his retirement, the most beloved janitor in Colorado Springs prepared for this annual ritual, only this time there was a new twist.



**On May 30, 1984 the presenter became the presentee.**

The commencement speaker that year was the President of the United States, President Ronald Reagan. Looking over the sea of young faces that represented the very best our Nation has to offer, he said: "America's men and women of today have made us a great Nation." And then the President turned his attention to the past, calling forward a 66-year old janitor crisply dressed in a uniform that still fit his trim frame. Forty years after his heroism at Altavilla, Italy and 17 years after his retirement from a military career, the President hung the Medal of Honor around the janitor's neck. The cadets themselves, had decided proper recognition of their janitor was long overdue, and had taken steps to see an "oversight" corrected.



## Bill Crawford

As a janitor William “Bill” Crawford certainly was an unimpressive figure, one you could easily overlook during a hectic day at the U.S. Air Force Academy. Mr. Crawford, as most of us referred to him back in the late 1970s, was our squadron janitor.

While we cadets busied ourselves preparing for academic exams, athletic events, Saturday morning parades and room inspections, or never-ending leadership classes, Bill quietly moved about the squadron mopping and buffing floors, emptying trash cans, cleaning toilets, or just tidying up the mess 100 college-age kids can leave in a dormitory. Sadly, and for many years, few of us gave him much notice, rendering little more than a passing nod or throwing a curt, “G’ morning!” in his direction as we hurried off to our daily duties.

Why? Perhaps it was because of the way he did his job—he always kept the squadron area spotlessly clean, even the toilets and showers gleamed. Frankly, he did his job so well, none of us had to notice or get involved. After all, cleaning toilets was his job, not ours. Maybe it was his physical appearance that made him disappear into the background. Bill didn’t move very quickly and, in fact, you could say he even shuffled a bit, as if he suffered from some sort of injury. His gray hair and wrinkled face made him appear ancient to a group of young cadets. And his crooked smile, well, it looked a little funny. Face it, Bill was an old man working in a young person’s world. What did he have to offer us on a personal level?

Finally, maybe it was Mr. Crawford’s personality that rendered him almost invisible to the young people around him. Bill was shy, almost painfully so. He seldom spoke to a cadet unless they addressed him first, and that didn’t happen very often. Our janitor always buried himself in his work, moving about with stooped shoulders, a quiet gait, and an averted gaze. If he noticed the hustle and bustle of cadet life around him, it was hard to tell. So, for whatever reason, Bill blended into the woodwork and became just another fixture around the squadron. The Academy, one of our nation’s premier leadership laboratories, kept us busy from dawn till dusk. And Mr. Crawford...well, he was just a janitor.

That changed one fall Saturday afternoon in 1976. I was reading a book about World War II and the tough Allied ground campaign in Italy, when I stumbled across an incredible story. On September 13, 1943, a Private William Crawford from Colorado, assigned to the 36th Infantry Division, had been involved in some bloody fighting on Hill 424 near Altavilla, Italy. The words on the page leapt out at me: “in the face of intense and overwhelming hostile fire ... with no regard for personal safety ... on his own initiative, Private Crawford single-handedly attacked fortified enemy positions.” It continued, “for conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at risk of life above and beyond the call of duty, the President of the United States ...”

“Holy cow,” I said to my roommate, “you’re not going to believe this, but I think our janitor is a Medal of Honor winner.” We all knew Mr. Crawford was a WWII Army vet, but that didn’t keep my friend from looking at me as if I was some sort of alien being. Nonetheless, we couldn’t wait to ask Bill about the story on Monday. We met Mr. Crawford bright and early Monday and showed him the page in question from the book, anticipation and doubt in our faces. He stared at it for a few silent moments and then quietly uttered something like, “Yep, that’s me.”

Mouths agape, my roommate and I looked at one another, then at the book, and quickly back at our janitor. Almost at once we both stuttered, “Why didn’t you ever tell us about it?” He slowly replied after some thought, “That was one day in my life and it happened a long time ago.”

I guess we were all at a loss for words after that. We had to hurry off to class and Bill, well, he had chores to attend to. However, after that brief exchange, things were never again the same around our squadron. Word spread like wildfire among the cadets that we had a hero in our midst—Mr. Crawford, our janitor, had won the Medal! Cadets who had once passed by Bill with hardly a glance, now greeted him with a smile and a respectful, “Good morning, Mr. Crawford.”

Those who had before left a mess for the “janitor” to clean up started taking it upon themselves to put things in order. Most cadets routinely stopped to talk to Bill throughout the day and we even began inviting him to our formal squadron functions. He’d show up dressed in a conservative dark suit and quietly talk to those who approached him, the only sign of his heroics being a simple blue, star-spangled lapel pin.

Almost overnight, Bill went from being a simple fixture in our squadron to one of our teammates. Mr. Crawford changed too, but you had to look closely to notice the difference. After that fall day in 1976, he seemed to move with more purpose, his shoulders didn’t seem to be as stooped, he met our greetings with a direct gaze and a stronger “good morning” in return, and he flashed his crooked smile more often. The squadron gleamed as always, but everyone now seemed to notice it more. Bill even got to know most of us by our first names, something that didn’t happen often at the Academy. While no one ever formally acknowledged the change, I think we became Bill’s cadets and his squadron.

As often happens in life, events sweep us away from those in our past. The last time I saw Bill was on graduation day in June 1977. As I walked out of the squadron for the last time, he shook my hand and simply said, “Good luck, young man.” With that, I embarked on a career that has been truly lucky and blessed. Mr. Crawford continued to work at the Academy and eventually retired in his native Colorado where he resides today, one of four Medal of Honor winners living in a small town.

A wise person once said, “It’s not life that’s important, but those you meet along the way that make the difference.” Bill was one who made a difference for me. While I haven’t seen Mr. Crawford in over twenty years, he’d probably be surprised to know I think of him often. Bill Crawford, our janitor, taught me many valuable, unforgettable leadership lessons. Here are ten I’d like to share with you.

1. *Be Cautious of Labels.* Labels you place on people may define your relationship to them and bound their potential. Sadly, and for a long time, we labeled Bill as just a janitor, but he was so much more. Therefore, be cautious of a leader who callously says, “Hey, he’s just an Airman.” Likewise, don’t tolerate the O-1, who says, “I can’t do that, I’m just a lieutenant.”
2. *Everyone Deserves Respect.* Because we hung the “janitor” label on Mr. Crawford, we often wrongly treated him with less respect than others around us. He deserved much more, and not just because he was a Medal of Honor winner. Bill deserved respect because he was a janitor, walked among us, and was a part of our team.
3. *Courtesy Makes a Difference.* Be courteous to all around you, regardless of rank or position. Military customs, as well as common courtesies, help bond a team. When our daily words to Mr. Crawford turned from perfunctory “hellos” to heartfelt greetings, his demeanor and personality outwardly changed. It made a difference for all of us.
4. *Take Time to Know Your People.* Life in the military is hectic, but that’s no excuse for not knowing the people you work for and with. For years a hero walked among us at the Academy and we never knew it. Who are the heroes that walk in your midst?
5. *Anyone Can Be a Hero.* Mr. Crawford certainly didn’t fit anyone’s standard definition of a hero. Moreover, he was just a private on the day he won his Medal. Don’t sell your people short, for any one of them may be the hero who rises to the occasion when duty calls. On the other hand, it’s easy to turn to your proven performers when the chips are down, but don’t ignore the rest of the team. Today’s rookie could and should be tomorrow’s superstar.
6. *Leaders Should Be Humble.* Most modern day heroes and some leaders are anything but humble, especially if you calibrate your “hero meter” on today’s athletic fields. End zone celebrations and self-aggrandizement are what we’ve come to expect from sports greats. Not Mr. Crawford—he was too busy working to celebrate his past heroics. Leaders would be well-served to do the same.
7. *Life Won’t Always Hand You What You Think You Deserve.* We in the military work hard and, dang it, we deserve recognition, right? However, sometimes you just have to persevere, even when accolades don’t come your

way. Perhaps you weren't nominated for junior officer or airman of the quarter as you thought you should - don't let that stop you.

8. *Don't pursue glory; pursue excellence.* Private Bill Crawford didn't pursue glory; he did his duty and then swept floors for a living. No job is beneath a Leader. If Bill Crawford, a Medal of Honor winner, could clean latrines and smile, is there a job beneath your dignity? Think about it.

9. *Pursue Excellence.* No matter what task life hands you, do it well. Dr. Martin Luther King said, "If life makes you a street sweeper, be the best street sweeper you can be." Mr. Crawford modeled that philosophy and helped make our dormitory area a home.

10. *Life is a Leadership Laboratory.* All too often we look to some school or PME class to teach us about leadership when, in fact, life is a leadership laboratory. Those you meet everyday will teach you enduring lessons if you just take time to stop, look and listen. I spent four years at the Air Force Academy, took dozens of classes, read hundreds of books, and met thousands of great people. I gleaned leadership skills from all of them, but one of the people I remember most is Mr. Bill Crawford and the lessons he unknowingly taught. Don't miss your opportunity to learn.

Bill Crawford was a janitor. However, he was also a teacher, friend, role model and one great American hero. He died 15 MAR 2000.



**The President of the United States  
in the name of The Congress  
takes pleasure in presenting the  
Medal of Honor  
to**

**CRAWFORD, WILLIAM J.**

**Rank and organization:** Private, U.S. Army, 36th Infantry Division. **Place and date:** Near Altavilla, Italy, 13 September 1943. **Entered service at:** Pueblo, Colo. **Birth:** Pueblo, Colo. **G.O. No.:** 57, 20 July 1944.

**Citation:**

*For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at risk of life above and beyond the call of duty in action with the enemy near Altavilla, Italy, 13 September 1943. When Company I attacked an enemy-held position on Hill 424, the 3d Platoon, in which Pvt. Crawford was a squad scout, attacked as base platoon for the company. After reaching the crest of the hill, the platoon was pinned down by intense enemy machinegun and small-arms fire. Locating 1 of these guns, which was dug in on a terrace on his immediate front, Pvt. Crawford, without orders and on his own initiative, moved over the hill under enemy fire to a point within a few yards of the gun emplacement and single-handedly destroyed the machinegun and killed 3 of the crew with a hand grenade, thus enabling his platoon to continue its advance. When the platoon, after reaching the crest, was once more delayed by enemy fire, Pvt. Crawford again, in the face of intense fire, advanced directly to the front midway between 2 hostile machinegun nests located on a higher terrace and emplaced in a small ravine. Moving first to the left, with a hand grenade he destroyed 1 gun emplacement and killed the crew; he then worked his way, under continuous fire, to the other and with 1 grenade and the use of his rifle, killed 1 enemy and forced the remainder to flee. Seizing the enemy machinegun, he fired on the withdrawing Germans and facilitated his company's advance*

[Source: [http://www.homeofheroes.com/profiles/profiles\\_crawford.html](http://www.homeofheroes.com/profiles/profiles_crawford.html)]