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Everyone Thought He Was Just A School Janitor, Then They Discovered His Heroic WWII Past



Image: [U.S. Army](#) / via [Pinterest/ibiblio.org](#)

As crowds of young men throng the hallways of a busy military academy, a lone figure winds his way through the crowd. An older man, he busies himself with sweeping floors and cleaning up the mess the cadets continually create. But while few even stop to give him a second glance, this janitor is hiding a secret past that's almost too incredible to believe.



Image: [David Mark](#)

In the late 1960s that man – a Colorado native named William Crawford – began working as a janitor at the USAF Academy in Colorado Springs. His job was to keep the building neat and tidy, taking care of everything from emptying the trash to cleaning bathrooms.



Image: [Mike Kaplan](#)

And by the 1970s Crawford – known to his friends as Bill – had become a familiar figure to the cadets who called the academy home. What’s more, many of those who have crossed his path have said that he was good at his job. Still, he never did anything to make himself particularly memorable to the young men preoccupied with exams and parades.



Image: [YouTube/Medal of Honor: Oral Histories](#)

Indeed, Colonel James Moschgat, who was a cadet at the Colorado complex in the late 1970s, has recalled a man who was easily overlooked. “Bill didn’t move too quickly,” he wrote in a 2016 article for the United Service Organizations’ *On Patrol* magazine. “And in fact, you could say he even shuffled a bit.”



Image: [YouTube/Medal of Honor: Oral Histories](#)

Yet although the cadets did not seem to consider Crawford anyone of importance, a chance find in a military history book would change their opinions for good. As Moschgat would discover, in fact, the humble janitor was concealing a heroic past.



Image: [Department of Defense](#)

It was in the fall of 1976 that Moschgat was flicking through a book about World War II. And in it, he came across some interesting details about the difficult ground campaign that Allied forces had fought in Italy in 1943.



Image: [U.S. Army Signal Corps](#)

In particular, Moschgat's attention was caught by the story of one man. He had been a private belonging to the U.S. Army's 36th Infantry Division. And on September 13, 1943, that private had found himself in the midst of a brutal battle at Hill 424, an enemy-held position close to Altavilla, Italy.



Image: [YouTube/Medal of Honor: Oral Histories](#)

While the rest of his platoon came under heavy machine gun fire, however, this private took it upon himself to take down the enemy gun placement totally solo. Even more amazingly, he managed to crawl close to the gun and toss a hand grenade in its direction. And as a consequence, he obliterated the weapon and killed its crew.



Image: [YouTube/Medal of Honor: Oral Histories](#)

Incredibly, though, the private didn't stop there. As his platoon advanced, he made his way towards another enemy machine gun. And yet again he wiped out the weapon and its crew with a carefully aimed grenade.



Image: [YouTube/Medal of Honor: Oral Histories](#)

The soldier then attacked a third machine gun post, causing the crew to flee. And after gaining control of the enemy weapon, he turned its firepower on the fleeing German forces. Just like that, he had secured the advance of his platoon.

Crawford Gets Son's Medal—

Major Gen. Terry Allen, left, commanding general of the 104th division, is shown congratulating George H. Crawford of Pueblo, right, whose son, Pvt. William J. Crawford was awarded the congressional medal of honor. The medal was presented to Crawford in a brief, impressive ceremony Wednesday afternoon at Camp Carson. Pvt. Crawford is a prisoner of war in Germany.



Image: [YouTube/Medal of Honor: Oral Histories](#)

Unfortunately, however, the private was captured later on in the battle on Hill 424 and assumed dead by his comrades. Nevertheless, news of his brave actions soon spread. His father even accepted a Medal of Honor in his stead – the highest military honor awarded in the United States. And when the private emerged unscathed from captivity in 1944, he found himself a hero of the first order.



Image: [Walk of Honor](#)

When Moschgat stumbled across this incredible story, moreover, he couldn't believe his eyes. That was all because the name given for the private was none other than William Crawford. And he had exactly the same name as the janitor he had been strolling past without a second glance for months.



Image: [YouTube/Medal of Honor: Oral Histories](#)

Intrigued, Moschgat approached the janitor with a copy of the book. After staring at it in silence for some time, Crawford confirmed that the private described in the dramatic passages was indeed him. According to Moschgat, Crawford's response was simple. "That was one day in my life," he said, "and it happened a long time ago."



Image: [YouTube/Medal of Honor: Oral Histories](#)

Crawford had remained in the military until 1967, retiring as a Master Sergeant. Upon his return to civilian life, he had then started work cleaning the hallways of the academy. In fact, he had lived a quiet life out of the spotlight ever since – and at that point had never even attended an official ceremony for his Medal of Honor.



Image: [YouTube/Medal of Honor: Oral Histories](#)

However, with Moschgat's discovery, all that was understandably about to change. The news that the lowly janitor had a secret past as a war hero spread rapidly, and cadets who had previously dismissed him were suddenly eager to share their time.



Image: [YouTube/Medal of Honor: Oral Histories](#)

In addition, Moschgat believes that the revelations also had a profound effect on Crawford. “After that fall day in 1976,” he wrote in the *On Patrol* article, “he seemed to move with more purpose. His shoulders didn’t seem to be as stooped [and] he met our greeting with a direct gaze and a stronger ‘good morning’ in return.”



Image: [YouTube/Medal of Honor: Oral Histories](#)

Yet despite his newfound acknowledgement Crawford continued working as a janitor, cleaning up after the cadets. Moschgat, meanwhile, has also recalled his graduation ceremony in June 1977, when the aging Crawford wished him luck in his future career.



Image: [YouTube/Medal of Honor: Oral Histories](#)

Eventually, then, Crawford retired to the town of Pueblo, Colorado. And he was in good company: at the time, the community was home to no fewer than four living recipients of the Medal of Honor.



Image: [YouTube/Medal of Honor: Oral Histories](#)

But Crawford's story still wasn't quite over yet. In 1984, more than four decades after the battle of Hill 424, he was invited to attend a special graduation event at the United States Air Force Academy. There, in the presence of cadets and officers, President Ronald Reagan formally presented Crawford with his Medal of Honor.



Image: [YouTube/Medal of Honor: Oral Histories](#)

In March 2000, aged 81, Crawford passed away; in recognition of his status, flags were flown at half-mast across the state. And, appropriately, he was buried in the USAF Academy Cemetery in Colorado Springs – the only non-enlisted soldier ever to be bestowed with such an honor. It's a fitting end, then, for a hero who could so easily have been forgotten.