

SECTION 2

History and Background

- Colonel Nelson Miles Holderman
- Veterans Home of California—Brief History

Medal of Honor



Colonel Nelson Miles Holderman

Nickname	"Neb"
Born	November 10, 1885  Trumbull, Nebraska
Died	September 3, 1953 (aged 67) San Bruno, California
Allegiance	 United States of America
Service/branch	 United States Army
Years of service	1916 - 1923
Rank	Colonel 
Unit	Company K, 307th Infantry Regiment, 77th Infantry Division California National Guard
Battles/wars	Mexican Expedition World War I
Awards	Medal of Honor Silver Star Purple Heart Croix de Guerre



Colonel Nelson Miles Holderman

Medal Of Honor Recipient

By Nathaniel T. Robertson Regimental Historian,
185th Armor Regiment

Colonel Holderman entered service in the California National Guard as Private, advanced to noncommissioned officer, and was later elected as a Lieutenant in Company L, 7th California Infantry Regiment. In 1916, he served with the Regiment during Mexican Border Service, and later organized into Company L, 160th Infantry, assigned to the 40th Division. He and his whole company were assigned as replacements to Company K, 307th Infantry Regiment, 77th Division. He was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor and the California Medal for Valor for his actions during the period 2-8 October 1918, while Commanding Company K, 307th Infantry Regiment of the "The Lost Battalion". He was wounded on 4th, 5th, and 7th October, although suffering great pain and subjected to fire of every character, he continued to personally lead and inspire the officers and men under his command. On 5 October, in a wounded condition he left the safety of his position to lead a series of counter attacks against a large attacking German force.

During the last of these attacks, while in great pain and bleeding from his wounds; he stood in the open so his men could see him moving towards the aggressors, affixing his bayonet; then blasting away with his rifle, whooping and hollering whenever he scored a hit. Inspired by

this incredible display of unflinching courage, his exhausted and demoralized men started firing and joining the counter attack. This unexpected action halted pinning down the attackers until they retreated; thus again preventing the positions from being enveloped. On 6 October, in a wounded condition and at great personal risk, he rushed through enemy machinegun and shell fire, and carried two wounded comrades to a place of safety. On the afternoon of 7 October, he and one other man, with only pistols and band grenades alone and single handed, met and dispersed an attacking enemy platoon; when they attempted to close in on the right flank while at the same time making a frontal attack. He killed and wounded most of the attacking enemy, thus saving two machineguns from capture as well as preventing the envelopment of the position.

That night the Germans used flame-throwers during their last all-out assault against his position. Although he was wounded and in a serious condition he remained on his feet, keeping the firing line organized, inspiring and leading his men preventing the envelopment of the position by a enemy superior force. He refused to let his wounds interfere with his duty until after relief was effected. The successful defense of the position was largely due to his courage. He personally led his men out of the position to the rear after the relief arrived and before permitting his wounds to be attended. The courageous optimism and inspiring bravery of this officer encouraged his men to a successful resistance in spite of five days fighting, hunger and exposure."

Colonel Holderman and his Company's actions have been credited as the primary reason why repeated German attacks failed, and the position was never captured.

Colonel Nelson Miles Holderman, was born 10 November 1885, died 3 September 1953, buried at Golden Gate National Cemetery, San Bruno, San Mateo County, California. After the war he returned to California, rejoined the National Guard and was appointed a Colonel. In 1926, the Governor of California appointed him the Commandant of the California Yountville Soldier's Home, where he served until his death in 1953. The "Colonel Holderman Years" was considered very successful. He built new dorms, buildings, hospital, and expanded the entire facility. Colonel Holderman was considered by many as the most decorated soldier of World War I, but never used his fame for personal gain. Many said of him, that he was honorable, generous, selfless, and worked tirelessly for veterans and his Country.

**Major Charles Whittlesey 's
Recommendation:**

Major Whittlesey, when making his recommendation for the award of the Congressional Medal of Honor to Captain Nelson M. Holderman, whom he designated to command and conduct the defense of the right wing and right flank of the position, had the following to say:

"While in command of Company K, 307th Infantry which company held the right flank

of the force consisting of six companies of the 308th Infantry, two platoons of the 306th Machine Gun Battalion and Company K, 307th Infantry, and which force was cut off and surrounded by the enemy for five days and nights in the Forest d'Argonne, France, from October 2nd to October 7th, 1918. Captain Nelson M. Holderman though wounded early in the siege and suffering great pain continued throughout the entire period leading and encouraging the officers and men under his command. He was wounded on the 4th of October but remained in action during all attacks made by the enemy upon the position, personally leading his men, himself remaining exposed to fire of every character. He was again wounded on the 5th of October, but continued personally organizing and directing the defense of the right flank against enemy attacks. During the entire period he personally supervised the care of the wounded exposing himself to shell and machine gunfire that he might help and encourage his men to hold the position. On October 6th, though in a wounded condition he rushed through shell and machine gun fire and carried two wounded men to a place of safety. This officer though wounded, continued to direct the defense of the right flank and on the 7th of October was again wounded but continued in action. On the afternoon of October 7th this officer and one man, with pistols and band grenades alone and single handed, met and dispersed a body of the enemy, killing and wounding most of the party, when they attempted to close in on the right flank while their forces were at the same time making a frontal attack,

thus saving two machine guns from capture as well as preventing the envelopment of the right flank. Again on the evening of the 7th of October and during the last attack made by the enemy upon the position, a liquid fire attack was directed at the right flank; though in a wounded and serious condition Captain Holderman remained on his feet, keeping the firing line organized and preventing the envelopment of the right flank. He refused to let his wounds interfere with his duty until after relief was effected. The successful defense of the position was largely due to his courage. He personally led his men out of the position after assistance arrived and before permitting himself to be attended. The courageous optimism and inspiring bravery of this officer encouraged his men to a successful resistance in spite of five days fighting, hunger and exposure."

After Captain Holderman was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor, Major Whittlesey wrote him the following letter:

*"Dear Captain Holderman:
To my great delight I have just received a notification of the award to you of the Medal of Honor. I am enclosing herewith the carbon copy, although I know the information will have reached you direct. This is the finest news in the world and I am looking forward with eagerness to passing it on to George McMurtry.*

I wish I could be on hand to see you decorated.

Let me hear from you when you can.

With best wishes, as ever,

Sincerely yours,

(Signed) Charles W. Whittlesey."

The Medal of Honor Rank at time of receipt:

Captain, U.S. Army

Unit: 307th Infantry Regiment, 77th Division

Place and date: Northeast of Binarville, in the forest of Argonne, France, 2-8 October 1918

Entered service at: Santa Ana, California.

Born: Trumbell, Nebraska

Medal credited to: California

Authority: War Department General Order 11, 1921



Citation

Captain Holderman commanded a company of a battalion which was cut off and surrounded by the enemy. He was wounded on 4, 5, and 7 October, but throughout the entire period, suffering great pain and subjected to fire of every character, he continued personally to lead and encourage the officers and men under his command with unflinching courage and with distinguished success. On 6 October, in a wounded condition, he rushed through enemy machinegun and shell fire and carried 2 wounded men to a place of safety.

Veterans Home of California, Yountville

A Brief History: In the Beginning

Between 1869 and 1870, the Society of Mexican War Veterans first proposed a veterans home for California. The Legislature passed a bill providing a plot of land in San Francisco for a home. The Mexican War Veterans were not a strong enough organization to spearhead construction of a home, and nothing was done until 1877 when the Lincoln Post of the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) in San Francisco, inaugurated measures to secure the land in the city and build a veterans home.

In 1880, Col. J.J. Lyon stood before the post encampment and proposed that the GAR build a veterans home. Lyon is often credited as the father of the veterans home for his role in bringing plans into reality. A committee was appointed and took title to the San Francisco site donated by the Legislature in 1877, but then decided it would be a poor location. They wanted the home to be in the country where the members could have work as well as enjoy the beauty of the countryside.

They decided that the public, which had supported their wartime efforts, would also back a veterans home association, and the group planned a major fundraising in San Francisco on Thanksgiving weekend 1881.

Despite some major problems, the Thanksgiving fundraiser was a success. A total of \$440,000 was raised and another \$20,000 came in over the next two years. A research committee was organized and 27 sites were investigated before the Yountville site was selected.

On October 24, 1882, the Veterans Home at Yountville was founded when the association paid \$17,500 for 910 acres of land known as the A.G. Clark Place. The home is located on land that was part of Salvador Vallejo's Napa Rancho.

Contrary to popular belief, George C. Yount (namesake of the town of Yountville) never owned an acre of the home land and, in fact, he had been dead for 17 years before the home was founded. Also, no one gave land for the home. All land was purchased with funds from public subscription. The land was a working farm when purchased and the association continued to farm while the first structure for the home, the 1883 administration building, was completed.

Opening Day

The first building at the new Veterans Home was completed in 1883, but the wait for funding for equipment for the facility delayed the opening until April 1, 1884. The home was to have been opened on April 16, to correspond with the signing of the peace agreement at Appomattox that ended the Civil War. Instead, the date was moved to April 1, to accommodate the first 13 members who showed up early.

A non-profit corporation, chartered by the State of California, owned and operated the home. The official name was the Veterans Home and it was funded and operated by The Veterans Home Association in San Francisco. Original funding had come from eight western states (GAR posts), and it was officially the home for both California and Nevada veterans.

The State Takes Over

From the beginning, the home received funding from both the state and federal government. In 1896,

Veterans Home of California—A Brief History, *continued*

the federal government decided that it would no longer pay allowances to privately-operated soldiers' homes. To avoid losing badly needed federal funds, the Veterans Home Association in San Francisco sold the home to the State of California for one 20-dollar gold piece.

At the time of the sale, the home consisted of 910 acres of land and 55 buildings, as well as successful farms, a dairy herd, hog farm, and chicken ranch. When the state assumed control of the home, the name was changed to "The Veterans Home of California."

There were 800 members in 1900 when the state took control. The home was still operated by the Veterans Home Association in San Francisco after the sale. Nearly all of the original organizational documents of the home were lost in the 1906 earthquake and resulting fire.

Between 1900 1919, the home continued much as before the sale to the state. However, the vitality seemed to have disappeared as the buildings grew older and new structures were not built. As a result, the home became very crowded.

World War II hero, Colonel Nelson M. Holderman, was appointed commandant of the home in 1919. Changes were badly needed and he began to make them. Civil War veterans still controlled the home and resented his demand for new buildings, new programs, and major changes. "If those buildings were good enough for Civil War veterans, they are good enough for any veteran," was a common complaint at board meetings.

Col. Holderman did not want a confrontation with the Civil War veterans and resigned as commandant in 1921, but said he would be back. After the home continued to decline over the next five years, and after the death of a few members of the board, Col. Holderman was reappointed commandant in 1926 and remained until his death in 1953.



From left to right, Medal of Honor recipient Nelson M. Holderman, Lieutenants A. K. Ford, and Chas D. Swanne.

Source: Santa Ana Public Library , 1917

The Holderman Years (1926—1953)

During his term as commandant, Col. Holderman completely rebuilt the physical plant, and finally got the 500 bed hospital the home had needed for years. The success of his programs owed much to his personal prestige. As either the first, or second, most decorated soldier of World War I, he was a popular national hero. Newspapers, magazines and radio always found him to be a good story, and he would use that fame and popularity to get what he wanted and needed for the home.

He never used his military prestige for personal gain, but never refused to put on his uniform and medals "one more time" for the home. Personally, he was very tired of both the uniform and the medals and once, when asked why he didn't wear the uniform more often, replied, "*Sometimes I get tired of looking like a Christmas Tree.*" Whatever his personal feelings, his dedication and constant work paid off for the home.

Veterans Home of California—A Brief History, *continued*

Another Turning Point

In the 1970's, the home faced another financial crisis. Decreased funding was having a degrading effect on facilities and staffing, to the point that the future of the home was in question. The California Department of Health and Services and the Federal Department of Health, Education, and Welfare were both threatening to withdraw certification from the home. The California Legislature took action, approving a \$100 million renovation master plan, reinforcing California's 10-plus year commitment to its veterans.

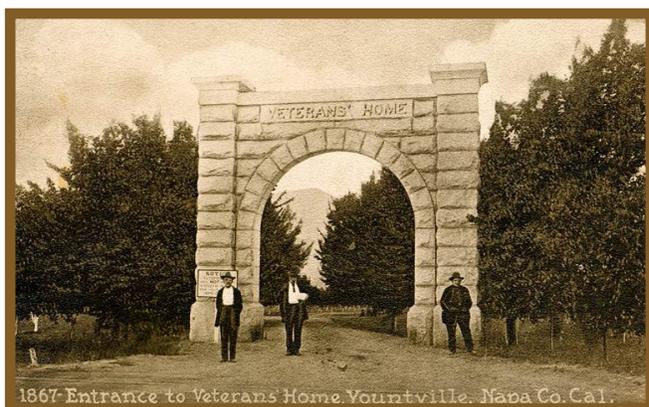
The Home Today

The Veterans Home of California, Yountville, continues to enjoy tremendous support from citizens, service clubs, and veterans organizations throughout the state. Their help makes many of the services provided by the home possible, especially during times of fiscal challenges at the state level.

This is especially true for those things that make the atmosphere truly homelike, with amenities such as televisions, closed circuit TV, the Members Services Center, Lincoln Theater, picnic grounds, community pool, and holiday celebrations, to name a few. The Home is a focal point for organizations such as, AMVETS, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Disabled American Veterans, the American Legion, and various local groups and organizations. Each of these represent thousands of veterans throughout the State of California and make their presence felt at the Home.

The Home is nestled in the lush and scenic Napa Valley, home to a world renowned wine grape growing region, which was at one time, the alternate Seat of Government for the Governor's Office and shared that duty with another state facility in Fresno.

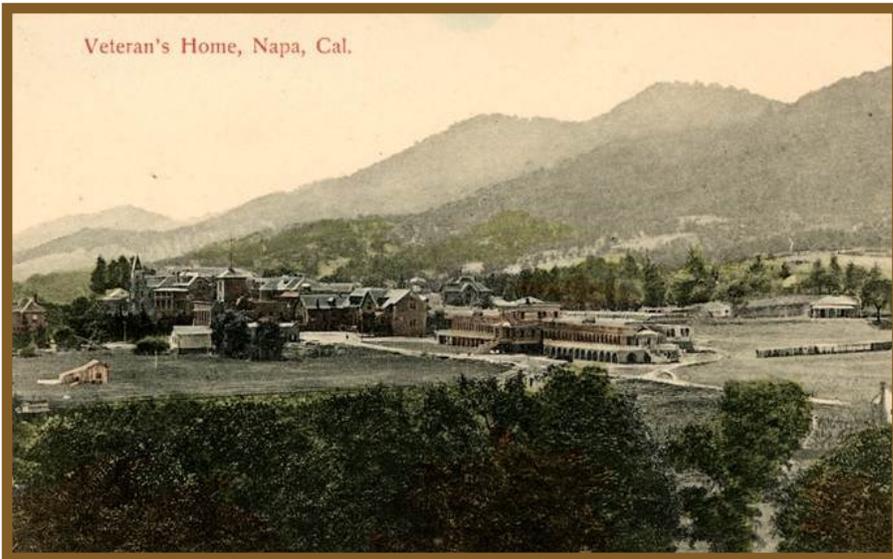
Information based on a news release by Steve Janosco, California Department of Veterans Affairs, Sacramento via The Virtual Museum of the City of San Francisco, online — <http://www.sfmuseum.net/hist1/vets.html>. [includes minor edits for grammar, spelling and historical accuracy—2013]



In the beginning...



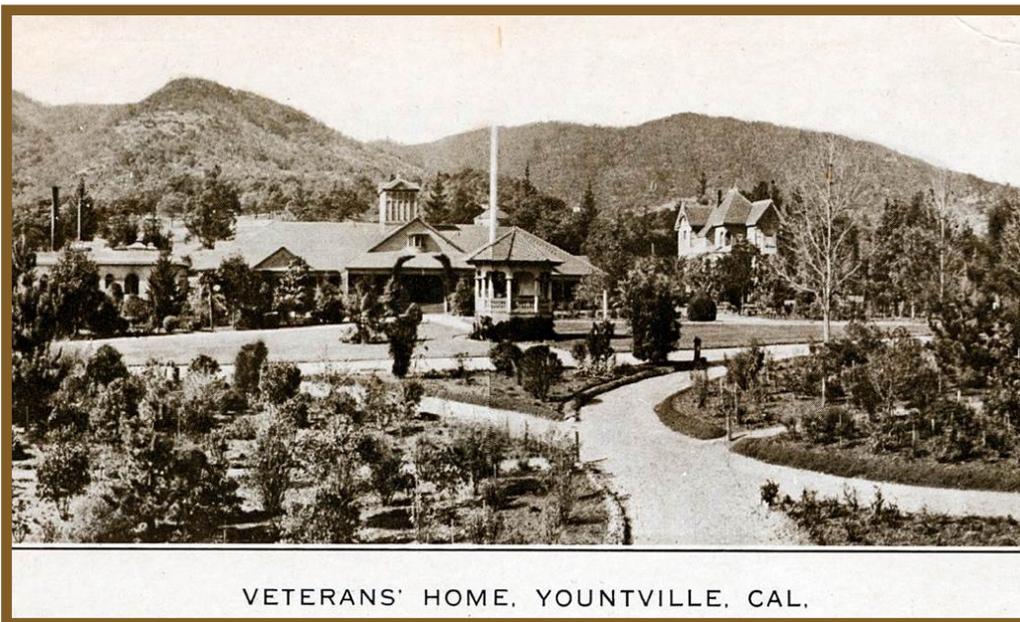
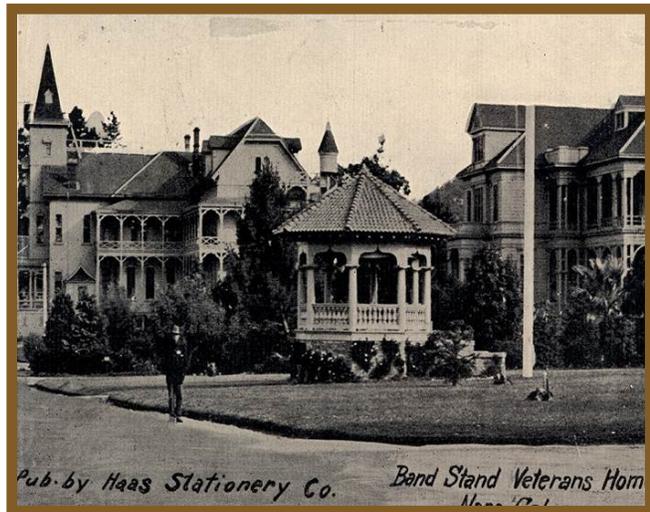
The Home today...



A “wild west” feel, the Home begins to take shape...

Although undated, these images of postcards purchased at eBay some years ago, help define the character of the Veterans Home from its early years.

The bandstand, shown at right and below, is the last standing original structure at the Home today.



Both native and exotic plants have become a hallmark of the sprawling grounds of the Veterans Home

A few more pictures of the Home...



Aerial view, looking south, of Holderman Hospital, now a skilled nursing facility.

Old Glory!



Ceremonial caisson at the Veterans Memorial Cemetery



Parade of State flags on California Drive



The tree-lined drive, welcomes everyone to the Home.

The trees lining the westbound entrance lane were donated to the Home at the conclusion of the 1939 World's Fair, held on Treasure Island, San Francisco Bay.