

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## Mr. Lincoln's Drummer

by

### G. Clifton Wisler

### Book Information

G. Clifton Wisler, Mr. Lincoln's Drummer  
Quiz Number: 12366  
Penguin Putnam, 1995  
ISBN 0-525-67463-2; LCCN  
129 Pages  
Book Level: 5.3  
Interest Level: MG

This story recounts the courageous exploits of Willie Johnston, an eleven-year-old Civil War drummer who became the youngest recipient of the Congressional Medal of Honor.

**Topics:** Adventure, Rescue/Save;  
Countries/Regions, United States;  
READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback  
Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades  
6-8; Wars, American Civil War

### Main Characters

Cal Stebbins an eighteen-year-old Vermont volunteer who serves with Willie

Captain Harrington the recruiter who signs up Willie and his father and later proves to be a poor leader in battle

Dr. Jones a Civil War doctor who befriends Willie

Erastus Buck a lieutenant who leads in battle when Harrington falls back

Jebez Davis (Jeb) a rebel drummer who trades with Willie for supplies

Julian Scott Company E fifer and artist who teaches Willie to play the drum calls

Pa Johnston Willie's Pa, who also goes to war at the same time as Willie

William J. Johnston, Junior (Willie) a ten-year-old from Vermont who joins the Third Vermont Volunteers as a drummer to participate in the Civil War

### Vocabulary

**amputation** to cut off an arm or leg  
**artillery** weapons for discharging missiles  
**contraband** goods or materials which are illegal to possess or own

**Peachfuzz or PF** a term used to identify soldiers who were not old enough to grow a beard

### Synopsis

Ten-year-old William J. Johnston enlists in the Third Vermont Volunteers as a drummer. He joins the army with his father during the early stages of the Civil War. Recruited by and under the command of Captain Harrington, he serves during the "Seven Days" battle on the Hampton Roads peninsula of Virginia between Williamsburg and Richmond. Willie's regiment suffers significant losses, including his friend Lando, and is required to retreat several times. Captain Harrington proves to be an inadequate battle leader, which requires Lieutenant Buck to perform command duties.

During the battles and retreats, Willie gives all his energies to helping injured soldiers. While all the other drummers abandon their drums during the retreat, Willie manages to keep his throughout the entire ordeal. When President Lincoln arrives to inspect the troops, Willie's is the only drum in the regiment. He is then commanded to play with the remaining musicians, including his friend Julian Scott, in the inspection parade for President Lincoln.

Brought to the attention of President Lincoln by General Smith, Willie speaks briefly to the president. Willie falls ill shortly after the inspection and spends several months recovering. He is then sent to serve as a nurse at a military hospital in Baltimore.

While serving at General Hospital, West's Building, Willie is summoned to Washington and awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor by Secretary Stanton for his behavior during the Seven Days. Willie Johnston remains the youngest Congressional Medal of Honor winner.

### Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## Mr. Lincoln's Drummer

by

### G. Clifton Wisler

---

#### Initial Understanding

What were the reasons Willie was chosen to receive the Congressional Medal of Honor? Support your answers with references from the story.

*He was able to keep his drum throughout the retreat. He was helpful to injured soldiers in spite of danger to himself. He was very young and fragile when Lincoln saw him. His name was the same as Lincoln's son's.*

#### Literary Analysis

Why did the author include Willie's interchanges with Jeb Davis, the rebel soldier?

*He wanted to include events that actually happened during the war. He wanted to humanize Willie's enemy and make a statement about combat soldiers.*

#### Inferential Comprehension

How did Willie's attitude toward war change as the adventure continued? Please use specific examples from the story.

*Initially he was excited to be part of it and thought the war was necessary to free the slaves. Direct experience made him question the necessity. Toward the end he seemed to ignore the reasons for the war but did not like the injuries and deaths.*

#### Constructing Meaning

From descriptions of Willie's behavior and the behavior of those around him, write or discuss a definition of heroism. Were there others in the story who could qualify as heroes with your definition?

*General Smith's observation, "A man who does his duty in the heat of battle and confusion of retreat" might qualify as a definition. A man who puts his own life in danger for the safety of others. Julian Scott could have been considered a hero for crossing the stream to help the wounded soldiers. Indeed, he was also awarded a Congressional Medal of Honor.*

**Recognizing Setting** Willie left St. Johnsbury, Vermont with his father and traveled by train to Virginia where they joined the Third Vermont Volunteers. After some months they were sent by boat to Hampton Roads, Virginia, where they disembarked and marched and fought their way toward Richmond. Following the Seven Days he was again sent by boat to Baltimore. Have the students trace Willie's travels on a map and mark the location of the battles as described in this story.

**Comparing and Contrasting** As an eyewitness to one of the bloodiest wars in the history of the United States, Willie describes injuries, amputations, and death on the battlefield and in the hospitals. Have the students compare and contrast the observations of Willie and Jeb to the words of Colonel Hyde and Captain Harrington as they gathered troops to enter the war.

**Identifying Reasons** For a brief period of time, Willie and Jeb become friends. This interchange represents activities that apparently occurred during the Civil War but seems to serve an important function in the telling of this tale. There is no acknowledged evidence that Willie and a rebel soldier traded goods. Have the students speculate on why the author chose to include these events and if the inclusion successfully served the author's purpose.

**Responding to Literature** Willie was recognized as a hero by receiving the Congressional Medal of Honor. He was able to carry his drum through a difficult retreat while the other drummers abandoned theirs. He also tried to help wounded soldiers whenever he could. Have the students read *The Red Badge of Courage*, a short novel by Stephen Crane. Ask them to compare the two stories and develop a definition for heroism using examples from both stories and their own feelings.

---

## Teachable Skills