

Looking Back

Cocke County's most decorated soldier

The story of Charles L. McGaha



Charles LaRue McGaha was born on Feb. 26, 1914 in the Cocke County community of Cadey to Laura McGaha.

As a child, he spent his time like most boys growing up in the Rocky Mountains of Tennessee: he loved the outdoors and spent time hunting and fishing, but he was also a serious student. His mother Laura McGaha was a single parent, but provided work for her son in a day where single parents were practically unheard of in East Tennessee. The responsibility of his upbringing fell completely on his mother and grandmother, who saw to his education.

Charles was an active youth in his community. He attended Cadey Adult Army and was a member of Hudson Grove Baptist Church. He was active in various youth groups and a member of the school's National Honor Society which his mother died was highly regarded.

Following his graduation in 1932, McGaha enlisted in the United States Army. He went through basic and was assigned to the Infantry. McGaha was a skilled rifleman and four-star soldier. He fell in love with the Army and, with trouble brewing in the Pacific, decided he wanted to remain with his unit.

When his term was up, he briefly returned home in Cadey, but missed and was shipped back to the 21st Infantry in Hawaii. When World War II began, McGaha proved to be a quick study of infantry tactics and conducted himself bravely many times under fire. The Tennessian worked himself through the toughest units and was promoted to Major. He was then sent to the Philippines

where he was one of the most decorated soldiers in the United States Army. He was one of the few soldiers to receive the Medal of Honor for his actions in World War II.

On Jan. 3, 1942 at 9:30 a.m., General Krueger's 11th Army Division forces were alerted and established a beachhead on Luzon. They were to fight and by nightfall 48,000 American soldiers were ashore and preparing for the campaign south towards Manila.

Japanese forces under command of General Yamashita were also preparing. They had been harassed by Philippine guerrilla operations and knew by their ability the invasion was imminent. Japanese command had stopped compelling the planes that were shot down and forced the General to aggressively deploy his troops into a defensive organization rather than a conventional one, as he had planned. He split the 250,000-man Force on Luzon into three organizations: The Shobus, who would defend against the Lingayen Gulf invasion and withdraw into the rugged northern mountains. The Kanbu group, who would defend the Clark Field airstrip, and the Shinto group, who was responsible for all of northern Luzon. All Japanese fighting forces were positioned with their backs to mountainous terrain and knew their planes were to hold out as long as they could before expiring into the hills in tragedy. At that point, they would be cut off and their numbers would be decimated.

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On the afternoon of Aug. 8, 1944, 36-year-old Charles McGaha was lost while operating a machine gun with one of his comrades at the Columbus Cal Company. He fired, completely unaware that he was in the line of fire. He was shot and killed.

Colombia police Detective David Hughes began an investigation of the murder and, through the efforts of a local businessman, was able to get a name to a suspect. Good investigation work was done when Hughes located a man looking for a job in the area. A lady of a nearby package store had seen the suspect on the day of the murder and told the Detective where he could start searching for the individual. A report was issued and the man was located in a small town in Pennsylvania. He was identified as Charles L. McGaha.

According to reports from the Columbus Police Department, when identified as 31-year-old James Edward Irving, he was a member of the 11th Army Cal Company on Aug. 8, 1944. He had a full record and was with McGaha. Apparently a struggle ensued between the two. Never saw Irving leaving the scene, but the clerk at the package store said he had observed two men standing with switches on his feet and heard a struggle. The owner's report would later state that Charles McGaha had been beaten and stabbed over 40 times.

Mike Reynolds, who was a prosecutor in the Lincoln County office at the time, says the case used to prosecute the case in the future courts.

"We announced we were going for the death penalty," said Reynolds, "but Irving decided to enter a guilty plea instead. He had claimed that McGaha owed him some money for joint work and was trying to get it back. In Georgia at the time, unfortunately, there was no 'Life without Parole', so all we could get him sentenced to in 'Life in Prison'. It's a shame that man like McGaha, who went through the horrors of war and returned home a hero, would be remembered like this in the future to avoid it."

Irving still remains in a Georgia prison, but because of the 1954 desegregation statute, could one day be eligible for parole.

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Ed Hooper Star Journal. This is the grave of Charles McGaha in Newport's Union Cemetery. A part of Highway 521 in Cadey is also named in his honor.

Representatives from Senators Price and Thompson as well as Big Bill Leavelle were on hand for the event. City and County officials as well as a delegation from the National Medal of Honor Museum honored the decorated Tennessian in an official graveside ceremony at Newport's Union Cemetery.

Jerry Lessner and the sons of Confederate Veterans John Ingram Camp in Jackson, Tenn, graciously donated a marble plaque naming the Tennessian's military service to America and put it in a case for the October celebration.

Special thanks for this story has to go to Mrs. Jeanette McGaha, the Columbus Police Department, and the staff at Fort Benning. It is for their assistance in obtaining the police reports and biographical material.

Astray Mike Reynolds, who prosecuted the McGaha murder case, is now in private practice in Columbus, Ga.

Even though they were considerably outnumbered, more American forces were deployed in the Battle of Luzon than in either Africa or Italy. Over 450,000 Japanese soldiers were killed in the campaign to invade the Philippines. While fighting in Japan remained still for months afterwards, General Douglas MacArthur struck Manila and declared victory June 20, 1945. American forces were never able to begin long range bombing raids against the Japanese mainland. Two months later, the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima ending the War in the Pacific and the immediate end of American lives in the island countries.



Courtesy of NMCH Museum. Major Charles L. McGaha in uniform prior to his service in the Philippine Battle of Luzon.

graves have begun recovering many of the bodies over from the Pacific Campaign of World War Two. They hope to be able to recover information about the lives before being it to date and receive. In addition to recovering equipment, archaeologists in 2006 discovered the remains of a Tennessian soldier listed as missing in action from World War Two's Pacific Theater. He was identified and returned to his hometown of McMinnville, Tenn. of interest for the family. No name has been withheld from this article.

Major Charles L. McGaha was one of eight Tennessians to receive the National Medal of Honor for their actions in World War II. Of that number, only one are still alive today. Charles Craighead lives in Loudon. Missouri and retired in Memphis. McGaha still resides in Memphis.

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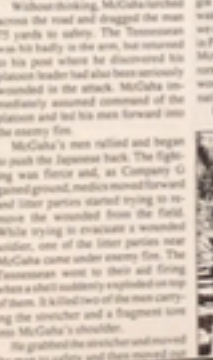
through his own efforts and was promoted to Major. He was then sent to the Philippines where he was one of the most decorated soldiers in the United States Army. He was one of the few soldiers to receive the Medal of Honor for his actions in World War II.

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Following the American victory at Iwo Jima and Saipan, the Marines followed the Japanese island. The Japanese put up stiff resistance, but the Americans overcame and pushed them from their positions. The Japanese put up stiff resistance, but the Americans overcame and pushed them from their positions. The Japanese put up stiff resistance, but the Americans overcame and pushed them from their positions.



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Courtesy of NMCH Museum
Japanese General Tomoyuki Yamashita took command of the Philippines operations capturing Bataan and Corregidor forcing Gen. Douglas MacArthur into retreat in 1942. In the 1945 Luzon Campaign, Japanese command deserted Yamashita, forcing him to "fight to the finish" with American forces retaking the Philippines.

McArthur's Pacific Campaign was supplemented by the brilliant naval victory of Admiral "Wild Bill" Halsey at Leyte Gulf and led the General to begin his campaign to retake the Philippines. The Japanese put up stiff resistance, but the Americans overcame

McGaha's men rolled and began to push the Japanese back. The fighting was fierce and, as Company G gained ground, medical personnel and litter parties started trying to remove the wounded from the field. While trying to evacuate a wounded soldier, one of the litter parties near McGaha came under enemy fire. The Tennessee went to their aid firing when a shell suddenly exploded on top of them. It killed two of the men carrying the stretcher and a fragment tore into McGaha's shoulder.

He grabbed the stretcher and moved the man to safety and then moved out in front of his position to draw the enemy's fire, while the Americans withdrew to safety. Once they were out of harm's way, McGaha regained his command and then collapsed from loss of blood and exhaustion.

The Tennessee was carried to safety and evacuated from the battlefield. His actions under fire near LaPan saved his platoon from total destruction and helped lead them to victory. MSgt. McGaha's leadership and courage so impressed General MacArthur, he awarded the Cooke County native the National Medal of Honor. Citing that McGaha's actions were in keeping with the highest traditions of the Army, President Harry Truman presented McGaha with the Medal of Honor at a White House ceremony in



Courtesy of NMCH Museum
Army soldiers on patrol in Luzon during the Battle for the Philippines. The jungle atmosphere of the island made battle conditions miserable for the soldiers.



This photograph was taken at Beta Meade Country Club outside of Nashville at a function honoring the Vernon McGarity and Charles McGaha. The three other recipients not pictured were killed in action during the war.



Courtesy NMCH Museum
Gen. Douglas MacArthur returning to the Philippines after American bombing raids to be launched from the Philippines.

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