

Looking Back



A soldier from the hills

The Story of Sgt. Troy McGill



Sgt. Troy McGill volunteered into the Army following a stint as a "wildcatter" in Oklahoma. Although his desire was to join the horse cavalry, he proved to be a first-class infantryman.

Troy A. McGill was born on July 13, 1914 in the Mount Olive community in James Houston and Pearl Beattie McGill. The native Sevier Countyman owned and worked a farm near Sevierville and, while they searched a decent living out of it, they, like a lot of others in those days, needed to find cash paying jobs to help support the family.

The McGills worked differing jobs and generally did what they could to keep the farm and make a living. When he wasn't in school or playing football, Troy spent most of his time on the Sevier County farm with the rest of the family.

Troy's neighbor Wesley McGill resides in Knoxville today and remembers his uncle fairly.

"Uncle Troy was my favorite uncle," said Wesley. "He was a southern country boy who was not of quite upstate and would do anything for you. The farm was always run as a place where the family could fall back to if things got rough and all of an open time working on it. They always had work to do on it if one of the brothers or someone in the family needed a job, but we had to work to earn it."

When the East Tennessee economy fell on hard times during the Depression, even the local "hater system" was not working and more throughout the region started looking for jobs opportunities away from home. Troy McGill decided to go west with his brother and find work as a "wildcatter" in the Oklahoma of Oklahoma. Although it was hard and dangerous work, the McGills wanted to see the profession, but it wasn't enough to keep Troy McGill happy and he began looking for opportunity in the military. In 1935, with World War II beginning to involve American interests, McGill volunteered into the U.S. Army on Nov. 4, 1935.

Troy McGill had always been fascinated with the horse cavalry and it was when he wanted to serve. The modern Army, however, was changing quickly and there was no more horse cavalry other than the ceremonial parade units. After being training at Fort Bliss, Texas, however, McGill joined the Army's 1st Cavalry Regiment and associated with them throughout his service, except for a short time when he attended infantry school in Texas. He is reported to see, the war in the Pacific was going badly for American forces and McGill's G Troop was called up for service.

can victory at the Battle of Midway. However, support for the Pacific theater began growing and offensive tactics quickly became a reality for MacArthur's campaign.

Using the men and equipment at his disposal, MacArthur and his campaign began devising an unusual approach to make the positions held by the Japanese. Instead of an island by island campaign that would have cost thousands of lives and resources he didn't have, MacArthur decided the American forces would jump over heavily fortified Japanese strongholds, take unheld or lightly defended islands, and cut supply lines. Allied forces would then begin a mopping up action to take out any elements that could pose a threat.

In July 1943, McGill and his unit were shipped to the Pacific staging area where his unit saw heavy action throughout much of General MacArthur's campaign in New Guinea. The Tennessee proved to be a quick study under fire and soon became one of the war's most prized soldiers. He was a remarkable shot and the hard work on the family farm in his youth had given him a natural strength that insured him well for the tropical conditions of the Pacific. As he watched the heavy

the Japanese had decided to make their position a point of attack to resist the strategy.

Arrived 4 a.m. on March 4, 1944, the morning air was torn apart by battle cries and rifle fire as 200 Japanese charged McGill and his eight men up. Like a wave out of the Wild West, the Tennessee and his outnumbered men fought back viciously and pushed the first wave back to the edge of the strategy and stopped for a second assault.

The Japanese attacked again and that continued to throw waves of men in heavy attacks at the American unit. The furious firestorm was taking their toll on G Troop. Five of McGill's men were killed in the assault and another was seriously wounded and needing medical attention. At this point in the battle and almost out of ammunition, McGill had to make a command decision to evacuate the wounded soldier or leave him to die and continue with the fight.

Sgt. McGill ordered the only remaining man in his unit, Private Elmer Stone, to evacuate the soldier to the rear for medical attention while he covered their retreat. Stone gathered up the soldier and jumped from the foothills at a dead end. He made it to the other bunker and informed the commander of the situation.

"There were over 100 Japs that came right at us," Pvt. Stone reported. "We saw our commander's head and Sgt. McGill told me to pull out and drop back to another bunker. When I left all the men in the squad had been killed or wounded except McGill and myself. It was just about dark when this happened."

Because of the ongoing battles around the vicinity, however, no relief could be sent to Sgt. McGill. The unit held the position long enough to prepare for the incoming Japanese attack and waiting their weapons.

The Tennessee, however, continued fighting and pushing the Japanese back on his own. When the last wave started, the truth of the situation soon became obvious to him. Alone and out of ammunition, the Sevier County native wanted out the Japanese were within five yards of his position. When they reached the mark, he grabbed his rifle like a club and, with utter disregard for his own safety, leaped out of the foothills and into the incoming force. It was the last time Sgt. Troy McGill was seen.

The Japanese attack the remaining soldiers lay in wait for an easy come. As news broke over the airwaves, members of the First Cavalry Division began looking for McGill. They searched in his last known position and found his body. How long he had lasted in that early morning hours was anyone's guess, but his body was surrounded by over 100 dead enemy soldiers. After investigation, it was judged that most were killed in hand to hand combat.

The strategy was held and Six Army began working to repair it. By the evening of March 5, reports showed that 750 of the enemy had been counted and listed in the Los Angeles campaign and numerous others perished in the jungle. The

McGill for his actions under fire. He was the first Medal of Honor recipient for the First Cavalry Division in World War II. Sgt. Troy McGill's body was interred in the Philippines with full military honors.

McGill's then 15-year-old nephew Wesley, who had also volunteered into the military, was in the Pacific and shared the USS Colorado when Arnold Forster Radio broadcast the story of Sgt. Troy McGill. The ship was one of many supporting the American Army's push toward the Philippines.

"I was drilling with the gun crew," McGill said, "when the radio operator yelled at me 'Troy Mac of your kinfolk was just awarded the Medal of Honor!' I didn't know what he was talking about at first. We were in the Los Negros Islands area loading supplies. And I didn't even know Uncle Troy was in the Pacific, but, when he called off the unit number, I knew it had to be him. We all gathered around the radio hoping they would air it again. When they replaced the story, it was the most incredible thing we had ever heard and I would have never thought Uncle Troy was capable of doing what he did. He was, by far, the smart and most mild-mannered of us. McGill, Troy's uncle who



General Douglas MacArthur's "island-hopping" campaign across the Pacific began successfully around New Guinea. This photograph shows American forces disembarking from a landing ship trying to take the beach of a New Guinea island.



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was an underestimation of what he accomplished. Was McGill a retired Medal of Honor who himself holds a Purple Heart for wounds suffered in the Pacific—moved home to East Tennessee and began working towards getting that his beloved Uncle's name off the never again to be forgotten."

"When Sgt. Alvin York returned to Tennessee from World War I," McGill said, "he got the world handed to him. He got a home, war pension, and honors from every corner of the state. There are a lot of things named after him. I'm not saying he doesn't deserve them. York was a great soldier, but Uncle Troy was completely forgotten by Knoxville, Sevierville, and Tennessee. What he did in combat you can't get over words. With him, he knew it was going to happen. When he faced those charging Japanese alone, Uncle Troy knew it was over and gave it everything he had. When I came home in Tennessee, I was saddened to discover there was nothing named after him and his story was only a footnote in history."

Was McGill's efforts to make sure the memory of his uncle's service is not forgotten are also worthy of recognition as it has often been a long and lonely fight for him. He has done whatever he could and, in spite of the odds, got some of the results he was searching to obtain.

McGill began a one-man crusade. On a small retirement pension, he purchased a bus ticket and rode all the way to Texas to retrieve the only known photograph of Troy McGill's service in the Tennessee Museum and the National Medal of Honor Museum in Chattanooga for use in displays. McGill's efforts slowly began to pay off—especially in the new home state in profile.

On July 3, 1990, Was McGill, once and future legislator, and the remaining McGill family members looked on as a section of Interstate 40 from the Loudon County line to the North Carolina line was renamed the Troy A. McGill Memorial Highway. In 1996, the National Medal of Honor Museum of Military History donated his photograph and citation along with numerous letters to the Knoxville Military Processing Center for inclusion into their Medal of Honor Memorial lounge. Although McGill is buried in Knoxville, it is the only place in the city that has both his photograph and the official Medal of Honor Citation.

Sgt. Troy McGill is expected to be one of the Medal of Honor recipients honored at this year's Tennessee Day Ceremony in Sevier County. It will mark the first time that the Medal of Honor recipient will be honored by the county his family called home.



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Troy McGill had always been fascinated with the horse cavalry and it was where he wanted to serve. The modern Army, however, was changing quickly and there was no more horse cavalry—other than the ceremonial parade units. After basic training at Fort Bliss, Texas, however, McGill joined the Army's 5th Cavalry Regiment and remained with them throughout his service, except for a short time when he attended infantry school in Texas. As he rejoined his unit, the war in the Pacific was going badly for American forces and McGill's G Troop was called up for service.

General Douglas MacArthur's first campaign against the Japanese had proved less than fruitful. With most of America's Pacific fleet at the bottom of Pearl Harbor, America had adopted a defensive strategy. The Japanese had Americans outnumbered in men and resources and the situation looked bleak. Japan had dug in on most of the strategic islands and held them with fortified positions. With the nation's attention primarily focused on the War in Europe, General MacArthur was forced to fight for the most basic of supplies.

Following the stunning Ameri-

can victory over Japan, the troops sent back from their Pacific island strongholds to be could make the strategically important Philippine Islands. From that point, American forces could launch full scale offensives on Japan.

On Feb. 28, 1944, the First Cavalry Division's G Troop was the first unit to come ashore on Los Negros Island. While MacArthur's intelligence showed the island to be clear of major Japanese activity, it proved to be flawed. McGill and his men found themselves locked in heavy combat against the Japanese for four days and were meeting strong resistance from brutal attacks.

According to Japanese Army tradition, if the Emperor himself ordered the raid, it was called *Gyokusai*—"death with honor." It meant that every soldier facing the enemy must take up arms and give his life for his country.

It was soon determined that alcohol was fueling the Japanese soldiers vicious suicidal attacks as large stores of beer and sake were being captured by American troops in the succeeding assaults on their positions.

McGill and his men helped cut through the strongholds and were soon securing the vital Momote Airstrip on Los Negros. McGill and his men were assigned a defensive position on the airstrip perimeter made up of foxholes dug along a stone wall about 35 yards from the main line of resistance. They were ordered to set up a tactical spearhead and hold the position as Naval Construction Battalions could start clearing the strip and filling in the holes caused by aerial bombardments and naval shelling.

The G Troop squad got into position and began making defensive preparations. While McGill and his men worked to strengthen the position, they were unaware that

The Tennessee, however, continued fighting and putting the Japanese back on his own. When the last wave started, the truth of the situation must have dawned on him. Alone and out of ammunition, the Sevier County native waited until the Japanese were within five yards of his position. When they reached the mark, he grabbed his rifle like a club and, with utter disregard for his own safety, bolted out of the foxhole and into the incoming force. It was the last time Sgt. Troy McGill was seen.

The Japanese attack the remaining soldiers lay in wait for never came. As dawn broke over the airstrip, members of the First Cavalry Division began looking for McGill. They returned to his last known position and found his body. How long he had lasted in those early morning hours was anyone's guess, but his body was surrounded by over 100 dead enemy soldiers. After investigation, it was judged that most were killed in hand to hand combat.

The airstrip was held and Sea Bees began working to repair it. By the evening of March 4, reports showed that 750 of the enemy had been counted and buried in the Los Negros campaign and numerous others perished in the jungle. The captured records of Japanese Colonel Esaki showed that 1,400 members of his force had become casualties in the seven fighting up to March 4. American casualties in the Admiralty Islands battles numbered only 318 in capturing the region from over 5,000 Japanese.

When the report of the battle of Los Negros was submitted, military investigation verified it and tendered it to General Douglas MacArthur. After further review of the actions and units engaged in the Admiralty Islands, MacArthur personally recommended the Medal of Honor be awarded to Sgt. Troy

McGill for a *posthumous* Medal of Honor. *McGill's citation reads: "For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty while engaged in the capture of Los Negros Island, Admiralty Islands, during the war against Japan in World War II. He was a member of the Andrew Johnson Home in the city. He told me about the Sevier County native and how he made me a letter introducing me to his father and telling me of the 6-year-long fight he was in trying to get recognition brought to his uncle's sacrifices in World War II. At first, I didn't really believe the story until I dug in and started researching the New Guinea campaign of General MacArthur. After finally assembling the interview, military records and other news, I set back in amazement at the singular efforts of this one soldier fighting to hold his position and protect his men, while they returned to safety. Even the citation*

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Photos courtesy of the National Medal of Honor Museum of Military History
This is a photograph of Bertie McGill Fowler and Troy's remaining family being presented the National Medal of Honor during the ceremony at Fort Sill, OK. McGill was the first member of the First Cavalry Division to receive the Medal in World War II.