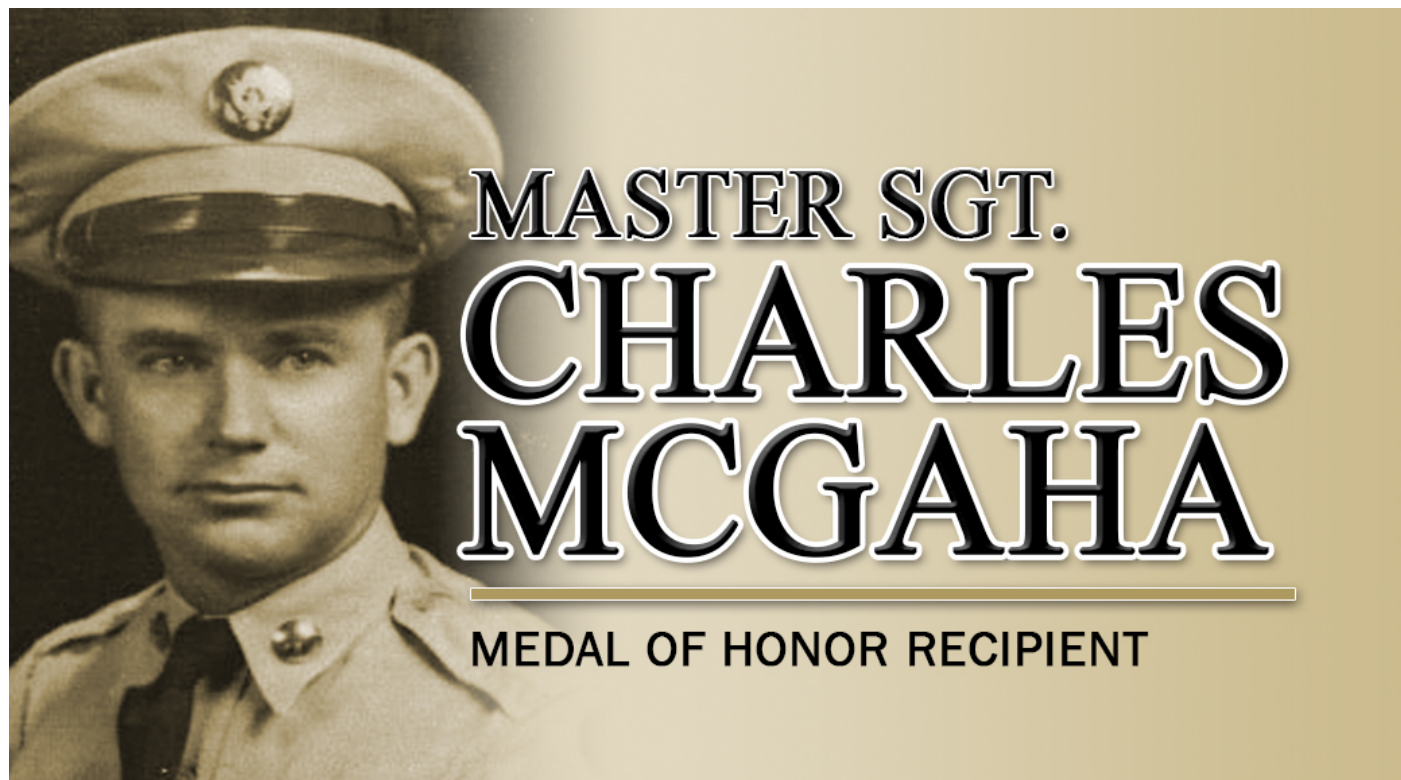


This Month in NCO History: Feb. 7, 1945 — Taking the Lead and Saving Lives at Luzon

By Pablo Villa - NCO Journal

February 18, 2016



For Master Sgt. Charles L. McGaha, the lessons on remaining calm and collect under fire came quickly.

McGaha was part of the 35th Infantry Regiment when it joined the newly formed 25th Infantry Division. The Tropic Lightning division stood up Oct. 1, 1941, on the Hawaiian island of Oahu. Ten weeks after its formation, the division earned the distinction of being one of the first U.S. military units to be embroiled in World War II when Japanese forces bombed Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7.

McGaha, like the other Soldiers stationed at Schofield Barracks, less than 20 miles from Pearl Harbor, were caught completely by surprise when the bombing commenced. The men scrambled to defend their base as it was strafed by fire from planes that were primarily targeting nearby Wheeler Field. McGaha was part of the effort that evacuated the wounded and relocated civilians that had been caught up in the devastation. Then he and other elements of the 25th took up positions throughout Oahu in anticipation of another attack.

The bombing ended, the United States declared war and American leaders eager to retake the Pacific crafted a plan for an offensive. The 25th ID was part of those plans and the wisdom McGaha gleaned from his baptism by fire would not only prove to be significant, it would vault him into the lofty ranks of Soldiers who have earned the nation's highest military honor.

McGaha was serving as master sergeant of G Company, 35th Infantry Regiment during the Battle of Luzon, which lasted from January to August 1945. The Allied offensive's objective was to gain control of strategically and economically important locations on the northernmost island of the Philippines from Japanese forces. The 35th was part of the task force charged with moving east from its landing point at Lingayen Gulf and securing the island's central plains.

On Feb. 7, 1945, two platoons from G Company — including McGaha's — were conducting operations on a road near the town of Lupao when a deafening boom halted their progress. The rumble was the opening salvo of a Japanese attack led by five tanks. The tanks were joined by 10 machine guns and a platoon of riflemen. The enemy successfully achieved the element of surprise and sent the Americans scrambling off the road. Now pinned down in a ditch, the Soldiers could only listen as a hail of bullets and tank fire rained down around them. Through the smoke, the men could see one of their own on the ground writhing in pain about 40 yards away. McGaha did the same thing he did at Schofield Barracks against seemingly insurmountable circumstances — he coolly rose to the occasion.

According to his Medal of Honor citation, McGaha sprang from his position and crossed the road to retrieve the wounded Soldier, dragging him

75 yards to safety. During the effort, a bullet pierced McGaha's upper arm, boring a deep wound that bled profusely. McGaha returned to his post, where he found his platoon leader seriously wounded and McGaha assumed command. Once more, he crossed the occupied road through a volley of bullets to help others attempting to save another Soldier. A tank shell exploded in their midst, killing two and further wounding McGaha. He got up, picked up the remaining man and carried him to cover.

With their situation bleak, McGaha ordered his men to retreat into the rainforest surrounding them. To aid their withdrawal, McGaha, "displaying conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity," deliberately moved to the front of the line to draw the enemy fire. The Americans scampered to safety while McGaha attracted the Japanese forces' attention. When he saw the last of his men get to safety, he followed suit. He rejoined his command before collapsing from loss of blood and exhaustion.

For these actions, McGaha received a battlefield commission to second lieutenant and was nominated for the nation's highest military honor. He was presented with the Medal of Honor during a ceremony at the White House on March 27, 1946. By then, McGaha had been discharged from the Army and had re-enlisted as a master sergeant.

McGaha was born Feb. 26, 1914, in Cosby, Tennessee. His family had a long history of service, prompting McGaha to attempt to enlist in the U.S. Navy at age 23. The recruiter turned him away as he had reached his enlistment quota, and McGaha turned to the Army, arriving in Hawaii in 1941. After the Battle of Luzon and his re-enlistment, he was stationed at Fort Benning, Georgia. He married Jeanette Large in December 1949. McGaha was later commissioned again and reached the rank of major before retiring from the Army in 1962. Along with the Medal of Honor, he was awarded the Silver Star and four Purple Hearts.

He died Aug. 8, 1984, after being stabbed during a robbery attempt in Columbus, Georgia. He was 70. McGaha is buried in Union Cemetery in Newport, Tennessee.