

The “What-not” Behind the Door Staff Sgt. James B. “J. B.” McFarland Story

by Jackie Layne Partin (2022)

Upon entering the front of my parents’ house in Monteagle in **1943**, one could give the old, wooden door a gentle push back hiding the small, homemade “what-not” in that corner of the living room. The what-not itself was a basic little corner structure with several triangular shelves. Seventy-five years later, if I close my eyes and relax, I can still see it, and the items my mother had placed upon it throughout my earliest years – a small glass, basket-shaped, flower vase; the small, blue and white porcelain clock with its two matching bud vases brought from France by my father at the end of WWII; a chalk figurine of a small girl looking down upon flowers surrounding a friendly goose; and a small photo of a soldier.

“Mama, who is that man?” “Sister, *(as she always called her daughters)*, that is J. B. McFarland, a friend who was killed in the war.” Daddy was in that war but returned home to us; that was the extent of my knowledge of “that war.” My daddy never talked about it.

Much like the secrecy that surrounded Cpl. Raymond Patrick Partin (b. **Mar. 15, 1922** – d. **Nov. 27, 1943**) on the military ship Rohna, very little was ever said about J. B. McFarland after the war. Both young men were Grundy Countians; both were single. J. B. enlisted before the draft and Raymond was drafted thereafter into WWII. Raymond’s unit was shipped off to Northern Africa to fight Hitler’s Nazis, and J. B. was shipped off to the Philippines to fight the Emperor’s Japanese army – one war, two theatres, two attitudes toward the **1929** Geneva Convention, same personal outcomes with two different causes and many secrets. Germany signed the Geneva Convention; Japan did not; (it did promise in **1942** to abide by the conditions but did not in any way do so.) Cpl. Partin’s story can be read here:

<https://www.grundycountyhistory.org/s/Pelham-A-Soldier-and-the-Rohna-copy.pdf>

Let’s do a little family background on James B. McFarland born **June 18, 1918**, for those who may not know his story or where he fitted into Grundy Co., Monteagle, Tennessee’s history. His parents were George Carter McFarland (**1850-1926**) and his third wife, Ella Myrtle (Cox) McFarland (**1882-1968**). His paternal grandparents were James W. L. B. McFarland and Sarah (Johnson) McFarland. J. B.’s maternal grandparents were William Herman Cox and Cynthia (Sanders) Cox. His siblings were Myrtle Francis, Elbert Carter, Milton E., Annie Mae, Leola J. and twins Elisha Hampton and Elijah. Baby Elijah was stillborn. Of course, J. B. had half-siblings from his father’s first two marriages.

J. B. enlisted **September 27, 1939** in the US Army Air Force after doing some post graduate school work. In the **1940 Census** record on **April 14**, twenty-one-year-old Pvt.

James B. McFarland was stationed in Sunnyvale, Santa Clara, California at the U. S. Army Moffett Field Military Reservation. On **Sept. 16, 1940**, the United States instituted the Selective Training and Service **Act of 1940**, which required all men between the ages of 21 and 45 to register for the draft. This was the first peacetime draft in United States' history. Noticing the difference in Pvt. McFarland's enlistment date on **Sept. 27, 1939**, we can see that the draft was not active at the time, so one may assume that J. B.'s decision to enter the military was his own. Many Grundy Countians got the call to register for the WWII Draft after the horrendous attack on Pearl Harbor on **Dec. 7, 1941**. Tennessee's WWII Draft Registration cards were destroyed several years ago, so not having been microfilmed, there is no database for them.



Ella Myrtle (Cox) McFarland
(1882-1968)
(J. B.'s mother)



Ella's son, James B. "J. B." McFarland
(photos courtesy of his half-sister
Beulah's granddaughter)

Moffett Field was headquarters for the 21st Pursuit Squadron through **1940** and **1941**. Since Staff Sergeant James B. McFarland was a soldier in that squadron, we learn from the *italicized* excerpt in the next paragraph that his feet were on the ground in the Philippines in **1941**. All military pilots today (**2022**) are officers; however, "*A sergeant pilot*

was a non-commissioned officer who had undergone flight training and was a qualified pilot in the air forces of several Commonwealth countries before, during and after World War II. It was also a term used in the United States Army Air Forces, where they were commonly called flying sergeants. After World War II, non-commissioned pilots began to be phased out and today all air force pilots are commissioned officers. ([Wikipedia](#)) We might conclude that J. B. probably was a pilot but also participated in other duties of his squadron and group. These men knew something big was coming up, and their training at Moffett field might save not only their lives but many other soldiers and civilians. The Japanese flexed their muscles all around the South China Sea and were obviously preparing to take the Philippine Commonwealth from the U. S. A. The air squadrons and groups sometimes got to the Philippines before their Warhawk planes arrived on Clark Field.

*“It is close to a tradition that this country enters its foreign wars unprepared. World War II, though long on the horizon, was no exception. The epitome of that lamentable situation was the condition of American defense forces in the Philippine Islands on **Dec. 8, 1941**. US strategists were convinced that war with Japan was inevitable and would begin with an attack on the Philippines. Some small and belated effort had been made to reinforce the 19,000 Army, Navy, and USAAF forces in the Islands. However, the entire fighter defense of the Philippines rested on **the 24th Pursuit Group**, commanded by Maj. Orrin L. Grover. On the eve of **Dec. 8** (Dec. 7 at Pearl Harbor), the 24th had only 72 P-40s, some of them early B models, and 18 obsolete P-35s in commission to meet an invasion force that included an estimated 450 Japanese aircraft, many flown by veterans of 10 years fighting in China. (Valor: Hero of the Philippines by **John L. Frisbee**). I think we can say that Staff Sgt. McFarland was in the midst of his first real battlefield.*

The Americans and Filipinos were drastically outnumbered, outgunned, and more or less alone in the huge battle that raged on throughout **December of 1941**. The Japanese took the capital city of Manila on Christmas Eve, **Dec. 24, 1941**, just seventeen days after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. On **April 9, 1942**, the Bataan Peninsula was surrendered to the Japanese. Where was Grundy County’s young hero soldier during these days? Was Staff Sgt. McFarland involved in the defense of Manila? Was he captured on Christmas Eve? When his squadron and group lost their planes, they didn’t quit. They became infantrymen, as many others did under certain circumstances.

Did Staff Sgt. McFarland walk with his fellow American and Filipino POWs on what was known as the Bataan Death March? One g-granddaughter of George Carter McFarland recalls family talk being that J. B. died in the Death March. The captors “... ferocity grew as we marched ... they were no longer content with mauling stragglers or pricking them with bayonet points. The thrusts were intended to kill.” - Capt. William Dyess, **21st Pursuit Squadron commander**. If J. B. were still alive, he would have been right there as near as possible to Capt. Dyess, his commander, and if he reached the terminus POW camps, he would have been centered in one of the two, Camp O’Connell or Camp Cabanatuan. If he did march the sixty-five miles, he survived, but thousands didn’t. J. B. was not yet prepared to die.

General MacArthur had left Manila for Corregidor, the island assigned to courageously protect the bay and city of Manila. Other soldiers and escaped POWs managed to make the same trip. Things couldn't get any worse, or could they? Gen. MacArthur was ordered to Australia and promised the beleaguered army that he would return. Could J. B. have escaped the death march or camp and managed to get to Corregidor? Many years ago, I talked a few minutes with June (Aylor) Long (dec'd) of Monteagle about her uncle, J. B. McFarland. June's mother was Myrtle Francis (McFarland) Long. I took no notes or did no taping. The only word she uttered that stuck in my mind all these years was "Corregidor." If J. B. was on Corregidor, then that horrendous episode in the war came to an end one day after the Japanese landed to take the island on **May 5, 1942**. On **May 6**, Gen. Wainwright surrendered the island to the Emperor's Army. He and his army could not survive any longer under the Japanese horrors. They still had fight left in them, but empty-handed of equipment and ammo, food, medical supplies, and an inadequate number of soldiers to fight had left the conquest of the Japanese an impossible mission at Corregidor. If the reader is burdened by the possibilities of suffering that J. B., and thousands of other soldiers and civilians had gone through in less than a year, then be it known that J. B. still wasn't ready to die. What else could the Japanese throw at his young life?



Staff Sgt. James B. McFarland

The Atlanta Constitution, **May 16, 1943**, "MCFARLAND, STAFF SERGEANT JAMES B. – Mrs. Ella McFarland, mother, Monteagle." This news note was listed under the title, "Tennessee – Interned by Japan." There were two soldiers listed, one being J. B., meaning that he survived the Battle of Corregidor. The survivors of that or any other battle joined in the Death March that continued until Japan realized that MacArthur had regrouped, grown stronger and turned his face north back toward the Philippines. J. B. may just have been shoved into the thousands of POWs at Manila while the Japanese were hurriedly preparing for McArthur's return.

Japan needed all POWs to work the fields, plant potatoes, and labor in the coal and copper mines on main islands of Japan. They were often put to work restoring Clark Field and other structures that would advance the cause of the Japanese Emperor. This presented a real problem for the Japanese navy, for how were they going to get the thousands of POWs north to the labor camps, and even later Japan saw the end coming for them in the Philippines, so ships were needed to transport all U. S. and allied personnel from the POW camps. Allow me to mention the brave female nurses and other

female personnel who found themselves working alongside their fellow soldiers in numerous, non-combative ways.

Enter now, the Japanese “Hell Ships!” There were many of these ships, but because of military records concerning Staff Sergeant James B. McFarland, let’s hone in on the Arisan Maru Hell Ship. Presuming J. B. defied all odds and survived the Battle of Manila and survived or escaped the Bataan Death March and survived the Battle of Corregidor, in short – he survived, period. But the greatest threat to his life and surviving to get back home to his mother and hometown of Monteagle, Tennessee was the Japanese ship seen below.



The Arisan Maru, One of Many Japanese Hell Ships

Many books, personal stories, videos and films have brought the “Hell Ships” to the public’s attention, but they were slow in coming. Broadcasting that story was difficult on the military, but this secret was not kept as quiet as the Rohna secret. Parents died without knowing what happened to their sons because of the big military secret, but even secrets can’t be kept forever. The Arisan Maru was designed to transport Japanese soldiers all over the South China Sea, but soon, a greater need came to the forefront – transporting POWs to Japan, China, or any Japanese stronghold. McArthur must not save the prisoners enabling them to thrust angry aggression on their captors/torturers. J. B. knew that Gen. McArthur was coming; his new presence was already being heard around the Philippines and the seas. Could he make it in time to save George and Ella’s son?

Acting quickly, the Japanese reached all over the South China Sea and around the Philippines, like hawks and eagles diving for rabbits in the hayfields of Grundy County, acquisitioning any ship that might be used to move the POWs to the North. The Arisan Maru cruised into Manila Bay where POWs had ultimately been gathered from all over the Philippines. Not abiding by the Geneva Convention rules, the ships were not marked as POWs. As many as possible, then more, allied troops and personnel, were packed standing against each other in the holds of the ship. Conditions were impossible—no water, no food, no toilets, no movement, major diseases spread from crushing contact from one body to the next. Red Cross supplies were kept from the soldiers. This was S. Sgt McFarland’s introduction to the real disbursement of Japanese horror on people who were not human in their sight. One would need to listen, read or watch documentaries to truly understand the nightmarish battles that went on in the Pacific fronts.

We don’t know how long J. B. held onto the shadow of a life that his body enveloped, but he did know how he would fade into eternity. All POWs aboard the Arisan Maru heard the allied planes above; they knew of the bombings of the hell ships; they prayed the allied bombers would soon learn that they were killing their own soldiers, not the Japanese warriors. After maneuvering the seas trying to get a safe path to Japan, and after many of the soldiers in the holds had died, on **December 24, 1944**, the allied torpedoes found the Arisan Maru. Our young man from Monteagle, and approximately 1,800 others, did not survive those bombings—only four lived to get back home and tell their stories. How burdensome this matter was when the allied ships realized they had been tricked!

[U.S., Rosters of World War II Dead, 1939-1945](#)

MCFARLAND J F JR	1 LT 0	451798
MCFARLAND JAMES	D-1 Z	14630
MCFARLAND JAMES B	S SG	6914385
MCFARLAND JAMES L	PFC	35706945

Commemorated in Perpetuity at Manila American Cemetery, Taguig City, Philippines. Officially, he is listed as MIA in the East China Sea.

J. B. was listed as single, Protestant, and with a “non-recoverable” disposition in death. He was Missing in Action or buried at sea. He was awarded a Purple Heart Medal. He is listed on the Fort William McKinley, Manila, Philippines Monument/Tablets of the Missing at the Manila American Cemetery.

Thanks to my mother’s little “what-not” behind the door, and my remembrance of it, you, the readers, hopefully will look upon J. B.’s memorial stone and pass his story on to those who today in **March 2022** are seeing or reading about the horrors of war in the country of Ukraine and the brutality of an unscrupulous, selfish, narcissist, who

wants the world for himself. May God bless the Ukrainian people in their efforts against Russia's Putin.



Memorial Stone for Staff Sgt. J. B. McFarland, Monteagle Cemetery

Please notice the airplane on his stone.