

Seabee Chaplain

James William McFall was already 40 years-old when the United States was attacked at Pearl Harbor. Just as he had felt the calling to ministry, the Presbyterian pastor now felt a calling to minister to the young men being called into the nation's military. McFall would soon find himself on a Pacific Island whose name, translated into English, was Holy Spirit.

McFall was an agriculture major from Anderson who attended Clemson College from 1917 to 1919. As a cadet, he was assigned to Company B. McFall did not return to Clemson after his sophomore year, instead he embarked on a journey that would, by 1941, carry him to Marion, Virginia where he was the pastor of Royal Oak Presbyterian Church. Founded in 1776, Royal Oak Presbyterian Church had a rich heritage of ministry even before McFall's arrival. When he announced his desire to become a Navy chaplain, the congregation granted him leave to serve his country—and the young men fighting for it.



The Navy, faced with the daunting prospect of pushing the Japanese back to their home islands, needed more than just aircraft carriers, submarines, and battleships in the Pacific. It needed



Men from the 57th Construction Battalion lay Marsden mat for the construction of an airfield on Espiritu Santo.

infrastructure. To build the airfields, port facilities, supply depots, and all the support structures necessary to turn remote islands into military bases, the Navy turned to its construction battalions, the Seabees.

The 57th Construction Battalion trained at cold, snowy Camp Endicott, Rhode Island from November 1942 to the end of January 1943. After a journey by train to the west coast, the battalion boarded the transport SS *Del Brasil* and sailed across the Pacific. On March 25,

escorted by a sleek Navy destroyer, the ship sailed into the primitive harbor at Espiritu Santo in the New Hebrides islands about 1,100 miles east of Australia.

Espiritu Santo had been chosen as a logistics center for the Southwest Pacific. Its proximity to the Solomon Islands, where Marine and Army forces were locked in a pivotal battle with the Japanese at Guadalcanal, positioned the island for its vital mission. But, according to historian Ian Toll, “there were no wharves, warehouses, or cranes in the harbor, and all heavy equipment had to be hauled to the beach from pontoon lighters.” Fuel drums were rolled off the decks of ships and floated to the beach where they were manhandled aboard trucks. When the 57th Seabees arrived, their first task was to build their own camp.

While the officers and men of the battalion constructed warehouses, petroleum tank farms, ammunition storage depots, airfields, and a seaplane base, Chaplain (Lieutenant) McFall was tending to their spiritual needs. On December 12, McFall boarded a boat to travel to one of the battalion’s outposts where he planned to conduct Divine Services. En route, the boat capsized. Survivors reported that Chaplain McFall sank at once and did not resurface. His body was not recovered.

Chaplain McFall worked to ensure that the men in his care remained connected to their faith and their God. He is memorialized on the Tablets of the Missing, Honolulu Memorial, Hawaii, the War Memorial in Richmond, Virginia, and on a marker in the Silverbrook Cemetery in Anderson.



See also *The Conquering Tide: War in the Pacific Islands, 1942-1944* by Ian Toll, 2015.