

Hedgerow Heroism

Leaving home to go off to college is one of life's transformative events. It would have been all the more so in the fall of 1937 when young Elmer Lewis McKesson left his hometown of Petersburg, Virginia headed for the small military college in the foothills of South Carolina's Blue Ridge Mountains. The United States was still struggling to extricate itself from the throes of the Great Depression even as international tensions in the Far East and Europe were beginning to escalate.

Once on campus, Mac McKesson excelled in his field of study, agricultural engineering. His character, scholarship, and personality qualified him for membership in the prestigious American Society of Agricultural Engineers. Apparently, he was less enamored with the military aspects of cadet life, finishing his four years at Clemson as a senior private in E Company, 2nd Battalion, 2nd Regiment.



Following graduation as a member of the Class of 1941, McKesson took a position as a soil conservationist in McCormick. He, like so many of his classmates, was soon called to active duty.

Assigned to the 329th Infantry Regiment of the 83rd Infantry Division, McKesson worked his way up to the rank of Staff Sergeant. The 83rd was one of the Allies' follow-on divisions arriving offshore of the Normandy invasion beaches shortly after D-Day. The division finally came ashore on June 19, and immediately met tough resistance from the experienced German forces defending their occupation. The skill of the defenders was enhanced by the Norman hedgerows, heavy hedges of thick vegetation and earthen berms bordering every field in the agricultural region.

The Germans battled from behind these obstacles which they defended with well-sited machine gun positions and pre-registered fire from mortars and artillery. American forces had to liberate France one field at a time.

On July 10, the 329th attacked at 0830 near the village of Sainteny at the base of the Cotentin Peninsula. After advancing three hundred yards, the attack bogged down in the face of dug-in German forces. On July 12, as the attack continued, Staff Sergeant McKesson, working with an officer, assaulted an enemy machine gun position from which murderous fire ranged across a field. According to the citation for the Silver Star medal, "Despite intense fire from the position through a wooded area, they successfully secured a hedgerow across an open field where they were able to build up a base of fire and establish" American troops in position. McKesson was mortally wounded in this

attack, among the fifty percent casualties suffered during the 83rd Infantry Division's first ten days of battle.

In addition to the Silver Star, McKesson was awarded the Purple Heart. He was survived by his parents. McKesson's remains were returned to the United States after the war and were buried in the Blandford Cemetery in Petersburg, Virginia.

