

The Beginning and the End

John Cuttino McKnight and Benjamin Green McKnight are one of three sets of brothers listed on Clemson University's Scroll of Honor. John, or "Mac" as his classmates called him, and Ben were born in Sumter, but by the time they departed for Clemson College, their father, who worked for the YMCA, had been transferred to Kannapolis, North Carolina. Both cadets majored in general science, and their time on campus overlapped. Mac was a member of the Class of 1940, Ben a member of the Class of 1941. The brothers were members of the State and Southern Conference champion swim team which first Mac and then Ben served as co-captain. Mac was also the president of the Minor "C" Club and Ben served on the YMCA Council. Both brothers would serve overseas during World War II, Ben in the Pacific and Mac in Europe. Neither would return.

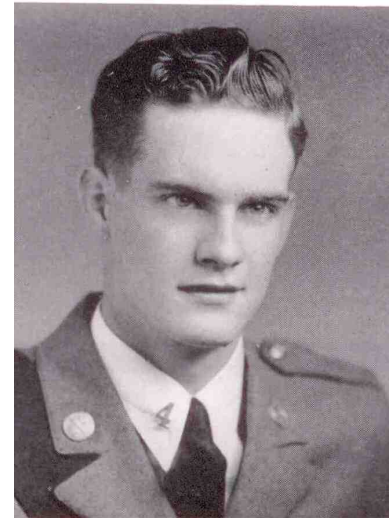
Following his 1941 graduation, Ben the younger brother, was assigned to the historically black 367th Infantry Regiment at Camp Claiborne, Louisiana. In February 1942, Ben was transferred to the 128th Infantry Regiment of the 32nd Infantry Division. In a letter home to his parents, Ben credited his time "in the colored regiment" for preparing him for his new assignment: "I know more than any of the men and most of the officers—how about that." By March, Ben and his new division were training at snowy Fort Devens, Massachusetts, but the following month the division was back on the train and headed west. From his troopship, the *Monterey*, Ben wrote that he hated to miss being home for Mothers' Day, but that the ship had "a good chaplain" whose services were "a real comfort to attend." Mac was also in the Army, but his unit was still in the States awaiting deployment. In a June 10, 1942 letter to Mac, Ben wrote from Australia that "The people here are marvelous and treat us fine."

The 32nd Infantry Division was committed to the New Guinea campaign, General Douglas MacArthur's first offensive in the Southwest Pacific. The weather and the terrain were almost as fierce as the Japanese themselves. Ben complained in an October letter of oppressive heat and pestering insects, adding "this is no picnic."



LEFT TO RIGHT: Coach Holtzendorff, McKnight, J. C.; Ehrhardt, J. S.; Martin, E. F.; Holtzendorff, P. B.; McKnight, B. G.

The 1940 Clemson College Swim Team—Mac McKnight is at the beginning of the diving board next to Coach P. B. Holtzendorff and Ben McKnight is perched at the end.

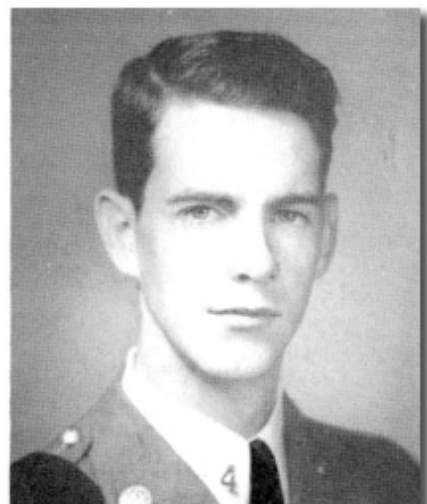


Ben McKnight, Class of 1941

On December 16, Ben volunteered to lead a patrol because he was the only unmarried officer left in his unit. On what his regimental commander described as a “dangerous mission,” Ben was wounded in the stomach. Operated on immediately, Ben appeared to be making progress when on Christmas morning he dictated a letter to his parents. Chaplain Wilfred Schnedler wrote the letter out for Ben who said, “I am making good progress toward recovery,” but Ben died in the early morning hours of December 26. For his heroism, Ben was promoted to first lieutenant and awarded the Silver Star. His commanding officer wrote Ben’s father that “Ben was a lovable youngster and the very best of soldiers, competent, cheerful, and too courageous. We all loved him. He was killed leading a strong patrol on a dangerous mission... His courageous leadership led to the successful accomplishment of his mission although we considered it too costly in that we lost him.” His parents would receive one more letter from Ben, an undated note that one of his comrades mailed after the young soldier’s death. In it Ben wrote, “I’ve lived a fairly clean Christian life and am a confirmed Christian and put my faith in God through Jesus Christ my Lord and Savior. I’m sure of my position in heaven, so don’t worry about me.”

The New Guinea and Guadalcanal campaigns that took place at approximately the same time helped destroy the myth of Japanese superiority in jungle fighting and were the first land defeats of the Japanese in the Pacific war. From these beginnings to the end of the war, Japan would remain on the defensive.

We know considerably less about Mac’s service. The Army created a separate Transportation Corps in the summer of 1942 and it was in this organization that Mac served. The new organization managed transportation of men and supplies for the Army and Army Air Force, including both rail-borne and shipborne movements. By the spring of 1945, Mac McKnight was serving in Europe, having attained the rank of captain in the Transportation Corps. In April, Mac was wounded in a “non-combat firearms accident (not self-inflicted).” He died from this wound on May 28, three weeks after Germany’s capitulation and the end of the war in Europe.



John “Mac” McKnight, Class of 1940

The brothers, who had played together as boys and marched together as cadets, had served at the beginning of America’s victory in the Pacific and at the end of the war in Europe. They would be reunited once more, when on December 11, 1948, the remains of Mac and Ben were buried in a double funeral at Columbia’s Elmwood Cemetery.

For more information about the 32nd Infantry Division, a Michigan-Wisconsin National Guard unit which drew many of its officers from North and South Carolina ROTC programs, read:

32 Answered: A South Carolina Veterans’ Story by Dr. Joe H. Camp, Jr.

https://www.amazon.com/32-Answered-South-Carolina-Veterans-ebook/dp/B010W9787G/ref=sr_1_1?dchild=1&keywords=32+Answered%2C+Joe+Camp&qid=1594579201&sr=8-1