Fred McGee's True Heroics In Comics

02.19.2009 by *Michael San Giacomo*

Folks in Steubenville, Ohio, were excited to learn that their own hometown hero Frank McGee won not only the Silver Star for his bravery during the Korean War, but that he would be immortalized in a comic book dedicated to war heroes.

The excitement soured when "Heroic Comics" #81 came out early in 1953, containing the story about how a wounded Cpl. McGee saved his platoon from machine-gun wielding North Korean soldiers on Hill 528.

The story was mostly accurate except for one thing – it portrayed McGee as white.

McGee, now 78 and still living in that small town near Steubenville, has gotten over the slight. But it still stings that his moment in the sun was spoiled. "When I first heard it was coming out, I was pretty excited," he told CBR. "I saw the comic while I was still in Korea in 1953. I looked at it, saw that my character was white, and felt it did not seem right. I was mad. I felt like someone else was getting the accolades for what I did. I think it was racially motivated."

Other than that, McGee said he liked the story.

The artist behind that comic book was a very young Frank Frazetta, who went on to become a powerful force in the illustration and comic book industries for his depictions of Robert E. Howard's barbarian hero, Conan. Frazetta could not be reached for comment on this story.

"Heroic Comics" publisher Famous Funnies never made it out of the fifties. Like many comics publishers, the company went out of business during the lean times. It's possible Famous Funnies never knew they made a mistake, or it's also possible that McGee's erroneous appearance it was a deliberate slight.

Black people were difficult to find in American comics of the 1940s and 1950s. When they did appear, African-Americans were often drawn as caricatures and played for comic relief, like The Spirit's occasional sidekick, Ebony White, or the member of the superhero group "Young Allies," Whitewash Jones. The early Tarzan comics were also exceptions, as black characters were often seen as tribesman in his jungle adventures. There was also a single issue of 1947's "All Negro Comics," which featured strong stories of black men and women, written and drawn by black artists.

Black characters did not begin appearing regularly in comics until the 1960s, but still rarely until Black Panther, Black Lightning. Luke Cage and The Falcon showed up in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

When Fred McGee got back home from Korea, he didn't complain. He had bigger fish to fry. "I never talked to the comic company, I didn't know how to contact them. They were up in New York somewhere," he said. "It was no big thing. I needed to get back to work at the Wheeling Steel Co. and I wanted to get married. Which I did. I've been married to Cornell for 55 years and I worked at the steel plant until my retirement in 1992."

McGee's real life adventures were perhaps as dramatic as those of the comic book heroe of his day. He was a 22-year-old black steelworker who had seen little of the world beyond his Ohio-West Virginia roots before he was tossed into an international conflict a half-world away. On June 16, 1952, in a battle near Tang-Wan-Ni, Korea, McGee took command of his platoon after his squad leader was wounded, and his men attacked the enemy's fortified position on Hill 528.

Of course, McGee was a corporal and not in line to take the lead, but the second-in-command froze when enemy fire exploded all around them. McGee recalls his superior "just standing there," unmoving. McGee realized it was up to him to take over. He fired at machine gun nests and held off the enemy while his platoon continued fighting up the hill. At one point, McGee was injured, but there was no one to take over for him. He ignored his wounds and continued fighting until orders came to retreat.

McGee remembers watching the mortar shell land in front of him, as if happening in slow motion. "I saw it coming at me, it looked like a baseball," he said. "It landed a foot in front of me and exploded, I got it in the chin and side of head."

Fred McGee watched as a 19-year-old South Korean ally was hit. He said he carried the boy for a while until he realized that the soldier was already dead.

Later, he took out the machine gun nests and provided cover for the rest of his platoon. The next morning, McGee and his team found the bodies of their fallen comrades, wrapped up by the North Koreans and left at the bottom of the hill – possibly as a sign of respect, but McGee says he doesn't really know why.

Naturally, the U.S. army heard of Cpl. McGee's heroism and awarded him a number of medals including the Silver Star; the United Nations Service Medal; the Combat Infantry Badge; two Purple Hearts; the Korean Service Medal; and the Bronze Service Star. But McGee was passed over for the Medal of Honor, for which his commanding officer promised to nominate him.

As proud as he is of his cherished Silver Star, McGee feels he should have been the first black American to have been awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. "After the battle, my captain, [Capt. Charles Simpson III] a West Point graduate, told me he would put me in for the medal of honor," said McGee. "It didn't happen."

McGee attempted to get his award upgraded in 1955. “I wrote to the governors of West Virginia and Ohio and asked for their help, but I never got the medal,” he said. “I think it was a racial thing. Between the Civil War and the Korean War, no black solider had ever gotten the award. I thought I deserved it, I still do.”
The Department of the Army disagrees. In 1995, they reviewed McGee’s case and denied it mainly because Captain Simpson had died 11 years earlier, so there was no first hand testimony about the promise of an award.

Victoria Secrest, of Atlanta, a friend of the family who is helping McGee in his quest, admitted that little has changed since 1995 but hopes that a new administration will be more sympathetic to McGee’s plight. She said McGee comes from a long line of freedom fighters, all the way back eight generations to an ancestor who was the son of an English woman and a black man who fought in the Revolutionary War.

McGee has his supporters, among them the Belmont County Council of the VFW, which passed a resolution in 2001 asking that McGee get the medal of honor.

U.S. Congressman Charles A. Wilson, Jr., D-Ohio, is another. “Congressman Wilson has met with Mr. McGee several times and thinks the world of him,” said spokeswoman Hillary Viers. “Rep. Wilson is waiting for documents from the family to see if there’s a way to move the medal process forward. Rep. Wilson is eager to see the documents.”

The documents are part of a voluminous “medal package” that must be prepared in order for the request to go through the arduous process of Congressional approval.

Secrest said the package was prepared and that all the appropriate forms were filled out and sent to the U.S. Army Review Boards Agency, which examines such claims before passing on recommendations to members of Congress. Ultimately, Congress will decide on the medal of honor award. The Army review board has strict privacy rules and could not be reached for comment on McGee’s case.

Secrest noted the large number of people who get the medal of honor posthumously. She does not want that to happen to McGee. “He faced seemingly insurmountable difficulties in his lifetime,” she said. “From not being able to sit at a lunch counter, sit in a movie theater or drink from a ‘whites only’ water fountain. He survived Hill 528 and still carries shrapnel in his body 57 years later. He’s earned the award.”