

Jesse Albert James

Sergeant, Army, from Eagletown OK

**Military Honor(s):**

Distinguished Service Cross

Citation: The President of the United States of America, authorized by Act of Congress, July 9, 1918, takes pleasure in presenting the Distinguished Service Cross to Sergeant Jesse A. James (ASN: 2339853), United States Army, for extraordinary heroism in action while serving with Company L, 4th Infantry Regiment, 3d Division, A.E.F., near Les Evaux, France, 13 July 1918. After many attempts to get patrols across the Marne had failed, Sergeant James alone swam the river, taking with him a wire, by which a boat containing two of his comrades was drawn across, without attracting the attention of the enemy.

Silver Star Medal

**LIFE & SERVICE**

**Birth:** 23 April 1892, Eagletown, OK, United States

**Place of Residence:**

**Race/Ethnicity:** Native American

**Death:** 12 December 1927 Ringold, OK, United States

**Branch:** Army

**Military Rank:** Sergeant

**Company:** [L]

**Infantry Regiment:** 4th

**Division:** 3<sup>rd</sup>

**Early Life (Pre-War): Includes general parent information, sibling information, education**

Jesse Albert James was born to Charles James (1872-1911) and Nancy Lucretia *McShan* (1876-1975) on 23 April 1892 in Eagletown, Oklahoma, an only

child. In 1898, Mrs. James married Newton Morehouse Pettijohn (1864-1937), with him, having six children; Edna (1899-2001), Alice (1901-1989), Osee (1904-1996), Bertie (1906-1975), Callery (1909-1983) and Carl (1912-1988). James lived with his mother, stepfather, step uncle, and step grandmother into the early 1900s in Oklahoma, afterwards living between Oklahoma and Arkansas. James was listed as a member of the Choctaw Nation (Five Civilized Tribes).

On 10 September 1911, James married Grace Lenora *Burke* (1892-1971) in Polk County, Arkansas, with her, having one child, George William James (1912-1990).

James told Medal of Honor Recipient John Lewis Barkley (1895-1966) the following story of his formative years;

*"He'd [James] been an orphan ever since he could remember, and had been brought up as a member of one of the most notorious bands of train and bank robbers in the Southwest. By the time he was fifteen the gang was being captured, one by one. It was taking the authorities a long time to get them all rounded up, but the young Indian was doing a little thinking for himself by now. When he found out that there was one particular sheriff who was out to get him, and was warm on his trail, he decided the time had come to do something about it. So he went to the nearest recruiting station to enlist. He told them he had no parents and close relatives, which was the truth, and he bluffed about his age...But when they asked him his name he had to think fast. He couldn't use his own and he'd forgotten to give himself another one. So he answered on the spur of the moment: 'Jesse A. James'."*

*"He [James] was something worth looking at. An American Indian. Tall, dark, heavy-muscled, straight as no one but an Indian can be. He had all the earmarks of a regular army man and he wore a sergeant's uniform"*

Note: John Lewis Barkley (1895-1966). *No Hard Feelings!* 1930.

<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=inu.32000009944960&view=1up&seq=117&q1=Jesse>.

James told Barkley, *"Jesse passed the examinations and got shipped off at once to China with the 15<sup>th</sup> Infantry. He was there five or six years"* [1]. Details of James' potential early service, presumably between 1912-1918, are currently unknown; the 15<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division, was stationed in Tientsin, China from

1912-1938. James was made Corporal on 23 February 1918, Sergeant, 15 March. Sergeant James and Company L, 4<sup>th</sup> Inf, 3<sup>rd</sup> Div, left Newport News, Virginia on 6 April 1918 aboard the U.S. Army Transport Ship *Great Northern*.

*"We were on the Great Northern, one of the fastest in the service. But her speed didn't do us any good. We had to follow all sorts of roundabout courses on account of U-boats, and on the sixth day we slowed down to keep close to a poky old scow which was carrying the 38<sup>th</sup> Infantry and 7<sup>th</sup> Machine-Gun Battalion."*

Sergeant James received the Distinguished Service Cross for his actions on 13 July 1918 near Les Evaux, France;

"The President of the United States of America, authorized by Act of Congress, July 9, 1918, takes pleasure in presenting the Distinguished Service Cross to Sergeant Jesse A. James (ASN: 2339853), United States Army, for extraordinary heroism in action while serving with Company L, 4th Infantry Regiment, 3d Division, A.E.F., near Les Evaux, France, 13 July 1918. After many attempts to get patrols across the Marne had failed, Sergeant James alone swam the river, taking with him a wire, by which a boat containing two of his comrades was drawn across, without attracting the attention of the enemy."

*"At the edge of the river we found a French officer and a couple of French soldiers waiting with a boat. The captain gave Jesse the end of a wire with a little piece of rope attached to it. He took the rope in his teeth, slipped into the water, and struck out. The captain whispered to me that Sergeant James was to land and pull the boat across with the four of us in it...When we reached the opposite shore we were to hide the boat, go out and get our prisoner, and bring him back to the boat. Another wire connected the boat with our bank of the river...Jesse pulled us across without a sound to give us away."*

The raid was successful in the end, a single German prisoner had been captured, and at least two of the men involved in the mission survived- James and Barkley. Though the team had encountered enemy troops whilst traveling across the river, they were able to abandon the boat (with the prisoner bound in the vessel, unable to escape) and make their way back to HQ & HQ Co. by the next afternoon.

Sergeant James and Co. L sailed to Brooklyn, New York aboard the U.S. Army Transport Ship *Kaiserine Auguste Victoria* on 13 August 1919, arriving on 22 August.

Commanding Officer George Wyche stated the following on Jesse,

*"Sgt. James is an expert sniper and scout. He worked well under fire and was apparently without nerves. He lead patrols excellently and was regarded as an unusually good man by his associates. His best work was done as a sniper being an expert shot and keen for this work. He was also a good scout. Learning quickly all phases of scout craft. His courage was unquestionable and he accounts a large amount of work without apparent fatigue. I found him to be an unusually good sniper and scout and a man to be relied on at all times."*

Though the citation mentions two individuals, the team may have included the following; *"The captain selected Jesse first, and together they chose the other four. There was a fellow by the name of Wilson, another who cooked for K Company but whose name I've forgotten, and myself. The fifth was a man named Coske."*

James, his wife, and their son, lived in Taliaferro, Oklahoma in the early 1920s, where James worked as a farmer. On 8 October 1923, James married Irene Lucille Mills (1904-2005) in Sevier, Arkansas, with her, having two children, Sam Albert (1924-1976) and Burnett Charlie (1925-2015).

Barkley wrote the following about his final meeting with James,

*"As for Jesse, I heard from him every now and then after I got home, but nothing particularly exciting. Then one day I got a telegram saying that if I needed any money, all I had to do was tell him how much. And I was to come down to Oklahoma at his expense right away. Of course I went. They'd struck oil on his government reservation land, and Jesse was living like a prince and having the time of his life. We had a great time together, and I went home feeling mighty happy about him."*

*Not very long afterwards I got word that his body had been found thrown in a creek near the town. It was murder for money, of course. There were two bullet holes in the back of his head. No one could have got Jesse from the front."*

James died on 12 December 1927 in Ringold, Oklahoma, he is buried in Tonihka Cemetery, Eagletown, Oklahoma.

*Jesse Albert James' Personal Narrative was derived from information found in public records, military personnel files, and local/state historical association materials. Please note that the Robb Centre never fully closes the book on our servicemembers; as new information becomes available, narratives will be updated to appropriately represent the life story of each veteran.*

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**Information provided by:**

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