

# John Everal Finlayson

U.S. Army Air Corps, First Lieutenant

1923 - 1945

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*He was just a boy when he went away  
To fight in another war,  
With never a thought of the price he would pay  
In the cause he was fighting for.*

—Excerpt from “My Son,”  
poem by John L. Finlayson (1948)

One of the most tragic messages a parent can receive in times of war is the report that their child has gone missing. Such was the case with John Everal “Jack” Finlayson, the pilot of a P-51 Mustang fighter plane that fell out of formation over the English Channel on January 18, 1945. Finlayson was never seen or heard from again.

Jack was born in Shinnston, West Virginia, September 20, 1923, to John Livingstone Finlayson and Byrd Olive Whiteman Finlayson. He was the youngest of three children, and the only boy. Byrd passed away October 20, 1936, leaving Jack to be raised by his sisters, Elizabeth Gwen and Jean Louise, a servant named Ruth Stout, and his father. Jack’s father owned a variety store in town, providing some support for the family during the Great Depression. Jack graduated from Shinnston High School in 1942 and immediately matriculated at West Virginia University in the fall to study aeronautical engineering. That same year, he also enlisted in the U.S. Army Air Forces as a cadet-in-training.

Jack’s interest in flight began at the tender age of seven, when he took his first plane ride during a 1930 “barnstorming” session at Shaver Field in Marion County. Like many rural airfields of the day, Shaver Field was little more than a level plot large enough for the simple biplanes of the era to take off and land. “Barnstorming” involved several pilots landing their planes at a local airfield, performing stunts, and giving rides for a fee. According to John Finlayson’s book, *It Happened Here* (1948), he paid \$1.50 for a pilot to take him and son Jack up for a 10-minute ride. “The green-clad hills and the plowed fields assum[ed] a fairy-like appearance as we flew over them,” Finlayson later wrote. He credited early aviators in settings like this with inspiring “countless boys, including my own son [Jack], to become pilots during World War II.” The experience stayed with Jack’s father for



**John E. Finlayson's 1942 senior portrait.**  
*Courtesy Bice-Ferguson Memorial  
Museum and Shinnston High School  
Alumni Association*

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**Another P-51 Mustang from Finlayson's squadron, the "Miss Marilyn II." Courtesy Imperial War Museum, American Air Museum in Britain, Roger Freeman Collection**



**Finlayson in his Army Air Corps dress uniform. Courtesy John Reger via FindAGrave**

the rest of his life: "When I hear the sound of a plane—I think of the little boy I took on that trip over Fairmont."

Flight and combat training soon took Jack away from his studies altogether. After several months, he was assigned to the 343<sup>rd</sup> Fighter Squadron, 55<sup>th</sup> Fighter Group, 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force. He piloted a P-51D Mustang fighter aircraft, which he named "Ellie-My Little Six." Naming the flying machines on which their lives depended was a common practice for World War II pilots and aircraft crews. The source of this moniker is unclear. Perhaps "Ellie" was a nickname for one of Jack's sisters—

or more likely his wife, Delores, whom he married July 8, 1944, and whose middle name was Elaine.

One of the prominent airplanes used during WWII, the P-51 possessed a long range and great maneuverability. The P-51D incorporated various enhancements from original P-51 models. A bubbletop canopy gave the pilot better sight lines and a new gunsight, two additional .50-caliber machine guns, and a simplified ammunition feed system that improved the aircraft's fighting ability. The P-51's primary job was escorting long range strategic bombers. Strategic bombing—targeting and destroying specific targets critical to the enemy's ability to produce war materials and, in turn, lowering the enemy's morale—developed as a significant component of Allied strategy in both Europe and the Pacific. Fighter groups, like Finlayson's 55<sup>th</sup>, protected long range bomber formations from German fighters on their missions to destroy strategic targets in Nazi-occupied Europe.

The 55<sup>th</sup> Fighter Group arrived in England in late summer 1943, and Finlayson's 343<sup>rd</sup> Fighter Squadron operated out of Wormingford in Essex. Besides escorting bombers, the fighter group supported ground combat operations. The 55<sup>th</sup> attacked gun emplacements



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during the St. Lô breakthrough in July 1944 following the Allied landings at Normandy, and it targeted German transportation facilities during the Battle of the Bulge in December 1944 and January 1945.

On January 18, 1945, Finlayson and his 343<sup>rd</sup> Fighter Squadron were flying back from an escort mission in Germany, when he and “Ellie-My Little Six” fell out of formation over the English Channel. Witnesses say his plane dropped below the clouds and was not seen again. Jack’s wife, Delores, said that she received news of Finlayson’s disappearance within days of its occurrence.

The military officially listed Jack Finlayson as FOD—Finding of Death. This code is used in cases when, after at least one-year from the time of a person’s disappearance, there is conclusive proof that they are dead or overwhelming evidence that they could not have remained alive.

For his service, Jack Finlayson was awarded the Purple Heart and the Air Medal with Oak Leaf Cluster. He is memorialized on the Tablets of the Missing at the Cambridge American Cemetery and Memorial in Cambridge, England, as well as the 8th Air Force Museum’s Memorial Garden in Pooler, Georgia. He is listed with other servicemen at the Shinnston Veterans Memorial in Harrison County, West Virginia, and on a large marker in the family plot at the local Shinnston Cemetery. A cenotaph, a monument to the missing, is dedicated to Jack at the West Virginia National Cemetery in Pruntytown.

John L. Finlayson’s book, *It Happened Here*, published three years after Jack’s death, is dedicated to his lost son. Though a father’s grief is evident throughout the opening poem, “My Son,” it ends on an optimistic note.

*But somewhere high in the skies above,  
Away from all suffering and pain,  
My son still flies—in a plane of love—  
And I shall see him again!*



**LEFT:** Jack Finlayson’s marker on the Shinnston Veterans Memorial.

**RIGHT:** A cenotaph (flat stone at center) also holds a place for Jack in the Finlayson family plot in the Shinnston Cemetery.

*Photos by Kyle Warmack*

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# John L. Finlayson

## Resting Place

West Virginia National Cemetery  
42 Veterans Memorial Lane, Grafton, WV 26354  
(304) 265-2044

Section MA  
Site 60

Interment Date: November 13, 1995

## About the West Virginia National Cemeteries Project

The West Virginia National Cemeteries Project is a program of the West Virginia Humanities Council, funded in part by the Veterans Legacy Program of the Department of Veteran Affairs and initiated in 2021. All biographies produced as part of this program are composed by West Virginia high school students, who conduct original research on veterans interred at the Grafton National Cemetery or the West Virginia National Cemetery, both of which are located in or near Grafton, Taylor County, West Virginia.

As home to one of the nation's earliest National Cemeteries, the community of Grafton has longstanding traditions of honoring America's veterans, including the longest continuously celebrated Memorial Day parade in the United States. The Grafton National Cemetery, located in the heart of the city and founded in 1867, is typically the endpoint of each year's parade. When the Grafton National Cemetery began to run short of space during the 1960s, the West Virginia National Cemetery was dedicated in 1987, just a few miles outside of Grafton in the community of Pruntytown. The same National Cemetery Administration staff cares for both facilities.

The West Virginia Humanities Council is proud to thank the following organizations for their participation in the West Virginia National Cemeteries Project: West Virginia Archives and History, the West Virginia University history department, Taylor County Historical and Genealogical Society, Taylor County Public Library, and Grafton High School.

**Please refer comments or questions to the West Virginia Humanities Council**  
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