

# Ralph Wayne Poling

U.S. Army, Staff Sergeant

1925 - 2002

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Nestled in the hills of West Virginia, in the small town of Philippi, stands a quaint country shop named Poor Ralph's Country Store. It is a familiar landmark to locals and travelers alike, but many may not be familiar with the extraordinary story of the man behind the shop's name.

Ralph Wayne Poling was born on January 14, 1925, to Opha and Mae Poling. His long life was punctuated by service in a bomber crew during World War II, during which time he was shot down over Europe and spent time as a prisoner of war. Through it all, he remained the humble, small-town West Virginian his friends and neighbors knew before and after the war.



**Ralph Poling and his wife, Elwanda, later in life.**  
*Courtesy of Richard Poling.*

Poling grew up in Philippi during the difficult years of the Great Depression. On the farm his family owned, Poling's day-to-day life consisted of hard work and a variety of chores around the house. According to Ralph, the farm generated enough food to sustain the family even through hard times. The strenuous physical labor of farm life kept Poling physically fit—something that could not be said of some other recruits when Ralph later joined the military. He would meet other young men who had grown up malnourished in the unforgiving circumstances of the 1930s.

In this difficult job climate, there were few steady employment opportunities. So Poling moved to Baltimore, Maryland, after attending only one year of high school in Philippi. By January 1943, at the age of 18, he found work at the Crown Cork and Seal Company, a huge producer of bottle caps, tin cans, and beverage containers.

Three months later, however, on March 31, 1943, Poling, like many other men his age, set off to defend his country. Ralph qualified and was assigned to the US Army Air Force bomber fleet, which was in its infancy in World War II. The Army promoted

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Poling to the rank of Staff Sergeant and assigned him to the top turret gunner's post in a B-24 Liberator bomber in the 512th Bombardment Squadron of the 376th Bombardment Group. As top turret gunner, he was positioned in the upper fuselage between the cockpit and the tail of the aircraft, allowing him to guard against most angles of attack. It also provided him a better vantage from which to engage enemy aircraft.

The Army had based the 376th, nicknamed the "Liberandos," in the Mediterranean Theater since as early as October 1942 where it helped drive Axis forces from North Africa and later Italy. By January 1944, the 376th operated with the 15th Air Force out of San Pancrazio, Italy, where it primarily targeted Axis factories and oil refineries in central and southeastern Europe. In May 1944, Poling joined the 376th in Italy. During the next two months, Poling and his unit flew missions against Axis military infrastructure in the Balkans, Germany, southern France, as well as oil refineries in Ploesti, Romania.



**Ralph Wayne Poling in his Army Air Force uniform during World War II.**  
*Ancestry.com*

On July 3, 1944, Poling and his crew were enroute to bomb oil storage facilities and marshalling yards in Giurgiu, Romania when anti-aircraft fire and enemy fighters brought down Poling's plane. In his book, *Some Memories of World War II*, Ralph recounts how the engines of his plane were shot out and he was thrown from his turret, falling down onto the flight deck. He evacuated the plane through the bomb-bay doors using his damaged parachute, but not before suffering severe burns to his face, arms, and legs. Poling noted that the whole crew survived the attack and exited the aircraft but scattered as they descended.



**A B-24 Liberator bomber is hit by enemy fire in a raid over Austria. Poling's bomber may have gone down in a similar fashion. It certainly did catch fire, as Poling's burns attested. *Library of Congress***



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Alone and lying injured in a field, Poling was taken prisoner, then interned at a camp called Largarule Prizoiniero near the village of Timisul de Jos, Romania. For the next five months, he survived entirely on whole wheat bread, which was sometimes infested with bugs. Starvation set in, wracking his body with pain. Poling did later write that although he and some other Americans were poorly fed, they were never really treated cruelly by the Romanians after his initial capture, when he had been paraded through the streets. In fact, Poling's memoir tells of a Romanian princess who came to take care of him, and later visited him in America.

After being liberated from his POW camp in December of 1944, Ralph was bussed to a nearby airport to begin his journey home. As if combat injuries, captivity, and starvation were not enough for one person to endure, Poling was to suffer one more indignity before war's end. In a room full of confiscated German guns at the airport, soldiers were told they could take souvenirs. As a fellow veteran was fooling with a gun it went off, causing Ralph to lose his hearing in one ear. Other developments were more fortunate: death records indicate that all ten crew members aboard Poling's bomber survived the war.

Poling was awarded the Purple Heart and Prisoner of War medal when he returned home to his family in the United States. He was picked up at the train station by his father in Grafton, West Virginia and conveyed back home to the family farm in Barbour County. He married his wife Elwanda Effie Poling in 1945, with whom he raised four children: Peggy, Richard, Jeff, and J. Bruce.

After the war, Poling felt called back to his home in Philippi. The Barbour County Country Store which had been in the family for years was passed down to Poling and became what is now known as Poor Ralph's Country Store. He spent his final days in the Louis A. Johnson Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Clarksburg, West Virginia, where he died on September 28, 2002. He was laid to rest at the West Virginia National Cemetery in Pruntytown, but leaves behind a legacy of bravery and service to his country.



**Ralph's Country Store near Philippi carries on the memory of its brave namesake. *Google Maps***

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## Sources

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## Errata

This biography was originally published with a photograph of “Ralph W. Poling” from the 1948 Morris Harvey College yearbook. That photograph was of Ralph Wilbur Poling, also born in Philippi, West Virginia, only a few years before Ralph Wayne Poling. Ralph Wayne Poling did not attend Morris Harvey College. The Council would like to thank Richard Poling for correcting the error, and for providing the portrait of his father and mother used in the present version.

## Resting Place

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

Section 2  
Site 431

Date of interment: October 1, 2002

## 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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