

Merhege Maron Saab

U.S. Army, Sergeant

1922 - 1988

Written by Montana Williamson,
West Virginia University

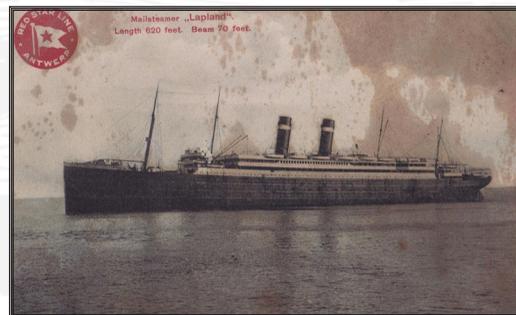
Merhege Maron Saab was born February 1, 1922, in Wallace, West Virginia. Merhege's parents, Moses Saab and Tacla Wakim Saab were first-generation Lebanese immigrants. Merhege was the oldest of the Saab children, followed by siblings Martha Washington, Pauline Teresa, John Phillip, and Janet Carmel.

The Saab family's story reflects the hard work, perseverance, and cultural significance of many Lebanese immigrants in the early 20th century. Moses and Tacla Saab were married in the Lebanese capital of Beirut in 1920. Shortly after their wedding, the couple, along with Moses's younger brother, Kicer, boarded a passenger ship for Belgium. From Belgium, they boarded the ship Lapland which brought the trio to New York City.

The Saabs were only one of thousands of Lebanese families looking for safety and financial security beyond their homeland. Amid the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, discrimination against Christian and Jewish citizens increased. Adherents to Christian or Jewish faith were forced to pay a higher poll tax called a jizya. Additionally, while they were allowed to hold some government positions and prestigious private sector professions, it was stipulated that they must always be subordinate to their Muslim counterparts. This treatment as inferiors within their homeland encouraged Christians and Jews to envision life elsewhere. Hopes of religious freedom and economic opportunity spurred Lebanese immigrants to settle throughout the United States. Perhaps this is what motivated Moses and Tacla. The Saabs were Christians, as they would later have their children christened in Wallace.



The Saabs were part of a larger wave of Syrian and Lebanese immigration into the United States—and West Virginia. Here the Scaff family stands in front of their Charleston, West Virginia storefront. *WV Archives and History, Ph2003-148*



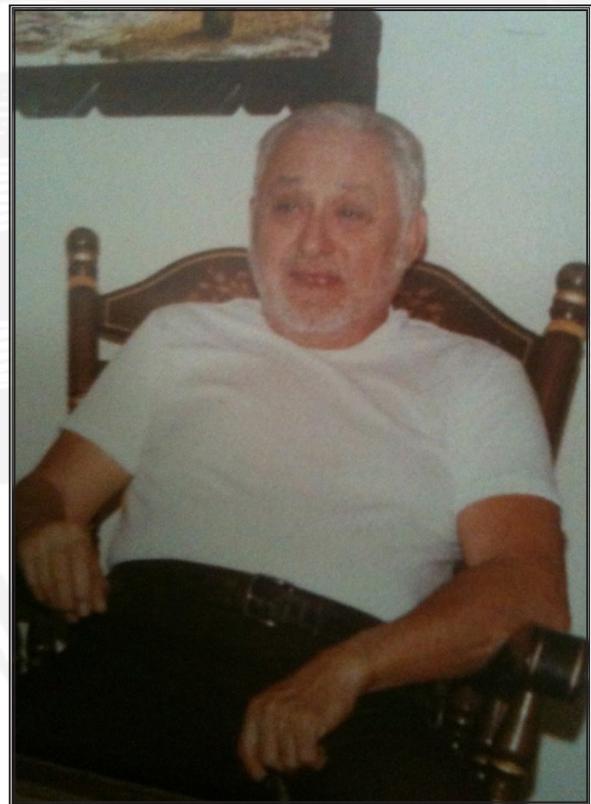
SS Lapland, the ocean liner that brought Merhege Saab's parents to America.

Merhege Maron Saab

Moses and Tacla's story is akin to other Lebanese immigrants in additional ways. Historians have noted that Lebanese immigrants preferred careers as peddlers once they settled in America. Lebanese West Virginians found plenty of opportunity to sell their wares amid coal mining towns and to rural housewives. The goal was to begin as a peddler, save money, and open a physical retail space. Often on the way to store ownership, Lebanese immigrants would work in the department or dry good stores of other Lebanese merchants. This is the trajectory that Moses followed to provide for his family. In 1930, Moses was working as a clerk in a department store in Harrison County. Ten years later, Moses is listed as a merchant who owned \$5,000 of his own property. Moses' hard work and grit allowed Merhege and his siblings to have a comfortable upbringing and financial security.

A 1907 report by the United States Immigration Department stated that 94% of Lebanese immigrants entered the country through "chain migration," meaning that Lebanese immigrants came to the U.S. to join loved ones who were already here. Merhege's childhood home was filled with extended family who followed this immigration pattern. In addition to his brother, Kicer, Moses was joined by Kicer's wife and daughter, his brother Thomas, and his father Moses Senior. These are the kin listed as living in the Saab household during census years. It's highly probable that more of Merhege's extended family lived with the Saabs as they got on their feet in a new country. Merhege grew up in a household full of Lebanese culture and stories of their homeland.

Merhege attended Liberty High School in Harrison County. After graduation, Merhege followed in his parent's footsteps and began a journey of his own. Merhege moved to Los Angeles, California. While Merhege's motivations for this move are unclear, Los Angeles was a popular destination for Lebanese Americans. By 1940, the same time that Merhege was living in California, the Middle Eastern population of LA was 15,000. This made it the largest Middle Eastern community in the country. Perhaps the Saabs had relatives who had settled there or had made connections through Moses's business. It is also possible that Merhege was driven by the same factor that motivated countless other Lebanese Americans to travel to California—the fact that its climate and geography closely resembled that of Lebanon and Syria. Having grown up surrounded by family who spoke of their homeland, Los Angeles would have been the closest Merhege could come to experiencing Lebanon for himself without traveling overseas. It is possible that Merhege



Merhege in later years. Though he passed away in Arizona, West Virginia was his home for most of his life. [Ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com)

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TOP: A Fairchild C-82 packet. Merhege probably worked on these planes at the Fairchild plant in Hagerstown, Maryland.
Wikimedia Commons

BOTTOM: C-82s under construction in the Fairchild Hagerstown plant, which expanded from fewer than 200 employees to over 8,000 from 1939 to 1943.

also moved west to attend college. His later military record states that he had one year of college education.

It was in Los Angeles that Merhege met his first wife, Maria Catalina Beltran. Like Merhege, Maria was the child of a first-generation immigrant. Her parents moved to California from Mexico and often traveled back and forth between the two countries. Historian Sarah M. A. Gualtieri demonstrates that Lebanese and Latino Americans formed close bonds in Los Angeles. As many Lebanese Americans were “step migrants,” making their journey in multiple stages across different countries and regions, many Lebanese Americans had roots and connections within Mexico and Latin America. Some specifically immigrated to the United States via Mexico to avoid the rigorous health exams conducted at Ellis Island in New York. Additionally, as Gualtieri notes, due to racial segregation in housing prior to World War II, Lebanese and Latino migrants were often living side by side in Los Angeles. Intermarriage between these two communities was extremely common in southern California.

Merhege married Maria Catalina Beltran on December 21, 1941, in nearby Yuma, Arizona. By the following December, the couple were back in the West Virginia area. His draft card stated that he was working in

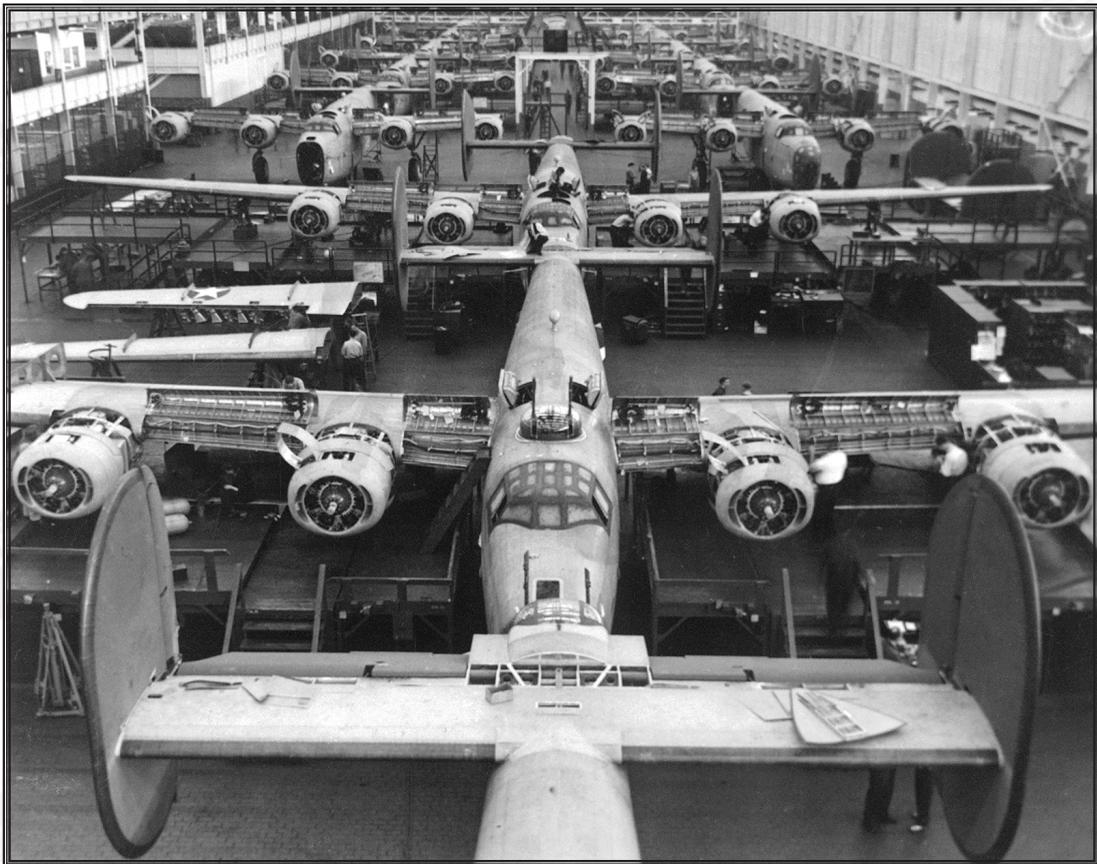
Hagerstown, Maryland, at the Fairchild Aircraft plant. Merhege and Maria would go on to have three children together, Sandra, Larry, and Deborah. Merhege and Maria were living in Clarksburg, West Virginia, and Merhege was working as a store clerk (perhaps in his father’s store) when he enlisted in the military on December 17, 1942. Though there are not concrete records of how many men and women of Middle Eastern heritage served in the war for the United States, it is estimated that 30,000 did. Merhege served for the duration of World War II.

By 1950, Merhege and Maria had separated, and their divorce would be finalized that year. Merhege retained custody of the couple’s children and was living in Morgantown, West Virginia. He worked

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first as a sales distributor for a soda company, a job to which his upbringing and previous work experience were well suited. He also worked as a radio technician in Morgantown.

Merhege and his second wife, Betty Lou Willard Saab, expanded their family by welcoming children Linda, Carol, Anita Louise, Diana, Debra, Charles, Joseph, Thomas, James, and Mary Beth. The Saabs would later move away from West Virginia, as Merhege worked as an assemblyman at General Motors Company in Flint, Michigan, before retiring to Arizona. Merhege passed away at the age of 66 July 17, 1988, in Arizona. He is interred, alongside his wife, at the National Cemetery in Pruntytown where West Virginians may pay their respects for his service and dedication to our country.



Merhege Saab's experience in aircraft production may have qualified him as an inspector in Army-supervised manufacturing facilities. Ford's Willow Run bomber plant is pictured above.

Merhege Maron Saab

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Resting Place

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

Section 1
Site 1812

Date of interment: July 23, 1988

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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