

## *An American Soldier's Tale*

U.S. troops didn't return to Corregidor until February 1945, when they retook it in the "island hopping" campaign that led to the Japanese homeland.

The first Americans to return were Army paratroopers who landed on what was called the "top side" of the island. They spent several days battling their way to an airfield, blowing up caves filled with Japanese defenders.

Among the paratroopers was 1st Lt. James Mullaney. During a break in the fighting, Mullaney spotted the skeletal remains of 15 to 20 Japanese who had fallen in a rough semi-circle. About 20 feet away, facing them, was the skeleton of a lone American.



"The uniform he wore had weathered the tropics much better than his body," Mullaney was moved to write five decades later. "The shoes and leggings were still in place around bones. The pants were frayed and brittle but still covered tile backside and lower spine. The wool shirt was torn."

The man's helmet, a World War I type, was cocked over his skull and cheek bones. His Springfield .03 rifle lay under his right arm, and the bone of his forefinger was inside the trigger guard. There was no ammunition left in the rifle.

"It scared me somewhat," Mullaney says by telephone from his home in Louisville, Ky. "I was afraid it might be my brother. It was one chance in 10,000, but he was in the Philippines. We knew he'd been on Bataan."

Mullaney gently moved the man's helmet strap and looked at his dogtags. The last name was "Skelton." The first name looked like "John." His hometown, included on dogtags at the time, was listed as "Eugene, Oregon."

The scene haunted Mullaney for years. He marveled at how the man had apparently battled courageously to the end. And his brother -whom he later learned had been captured and died a prisoner in Japan - was named John, too.

Fifty years flew by.

Royal and Darlyne Jaynes of Eugene took a 103-day trip to countries in Southeast Asia and the Pacific. It included a stop on Corregidor, and Darlyne Jaynes wrote an article about the island for International Travel News, a monthly magazine. As fate would have it, James Mullaney subscribes. He saw the article, learned the author was from Eugene and contacted Jaynes. He followed up on July 12 with the letter he'd been meaning to send, somewhere, to someone, for years.

As I write to you people I am hoping that John Shelton can in some way be remembered in your thoughts and prayers. If any of his family or friends can be located, let them know what a soldier he was. Show them this correspondence and tell them that here in Louisville, Kentucky, is one person who never met John Shelton but will never forget him.

Darlyne Jaynes contacted a Skelton relative in Cottage Grove, who in turn contacted Lucille Bowman in Eugene. And Lucille, 75, closed the book on an old hurt. "It means we finally know what happened to Johnny," she says. "If you wonder about something for 50 years, you come up with about 15 different things that could have happened. We just knew he was gone, that's all.

"He was protecting his country and his people. To me, that sounds like something Johnny would have done."

On the counter of the mobile home she and her husband share is a cardboard box containing the U.S. flag the Army sent the family after Johnny died. Lucille's father passed it down to her, and she intends to give it to her grandson, an Army veteran.

His name is John too.

Below is the text of the actual letter:

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Jaynes,

*This letter is something I've intended to write for many years but could never quite get around to putting it all in perspective. Secondly, I'm a procrastinator. Thirdly, I was and am in doubt as to whom I should address this unusual but true story.*

*I don't want my note to dwell on personal war experiences any more than is necessary to present accurately what took place on Corregidor Island in February 1945.*

*On February 16th of that year the 503rd Parachute Regimental Combat Team made a parachute drop onto Corregidor at 08:45. I was a member of this unit and jumped with the first wave. We landed on "Topside" where the barracks, the golf course, theatre, and officers' quarters were located. Prior to the assault we were informed there would be about nine hundred Japanese on the island. It didn't take long to realize that there were at least five to six thousand. About eight hundred paratroopers made the 08:45 drop. The next drop was scheduled four hours later.*

*I suppose in modern day military parlance this could be described as a fluid situation. At any rate that is what this writer was doing on Corregidor.*

*After eight days of heavy fighting on the tiny island (about three and a half miles long and a half mile wide at Topside to a few yards wide at the tail end) we finally moved around Malinta Hill and advanced toward the overgrown air strip called Kindley Field. It was at Kindley Field where my story took place.*

*We had captured the strip and were conducting patrols to clear out the caves and tunnels just west of there near Cavalry Point. In our earlier briefings we were informed that this is where the Japs had landed in April 1942 during their assault on the fortress that led to General Wainwright's surrender. As we moved through the tall weeds cautiously toward the bay we discovered many skeletons - I remember fifteen or twenty - all Japanese. The enemy had not taken the trouble to bury their dead. Just left them there to rot in the tropic heat or make a few good meals for the ubiquitous rats.*

*These bodies laid in a semi circle. I found one body facing the others in the semi circle from a distance of about twenty feet. It was an American...*

*The uniform he wore had weathered the tropics much better than his body. The shoes and leggings were still in place around bones. The pants were frayed and brittle but still covered the backside and lower spine. The wool shirt was torn. His helmet (World War One type) was cocked over his skull and cheek bones. He had all his teeth and the helmet strap gripped them lightly. He was in a prone position. His .03 rifle was under his right arm bones with the forefinger bone of the right hand inside the trigger guard. There was no ammo in the rifle or nearby.*

*I imagined for a moment how he had fought to the end. It was obvious that this brave man had killed many of the enemy and battled courageously in a hopeless situation. With due respect I gently moved the helmet strap and looked at his dog tags. His name was Skelton. I couldn't be sure of the first name but it looked like "John"... His home town was Eugene, Oregon.*

*I've often thought that I should write to the mayor, if Eugene has one, or some official about this incident but then I was worried that these details would possibly hurt his family or friends. I, mistakenly, surmised that as the years passed these memories would fade into oblivion as so many others have, but this event seems to be indelible.*

*As I write to you people I am hoping that "John" Skelton can in some way be remembered in your thoughts and prayers. If any of his family or friends can be located let them know what a soldier he was. Show them this correspondence and tell them that here in Louisville, Kentucky is one person who never met John Skelton but will never forget him.....*

James M. Mullaney