

Here is a short story which provides a poignant link between the 1942 and 1945 battles for Corregidor:

FAMILY FINALLY LEARNS JOHNNY'S LAST CHAPTER

by Eric Mortensen



It is strange to read Johnny Skelton's letters. They are so full of life – just ordinary life with all its promise – that it's tough to think he never came home.

"Well, I'm in the _____ Army"

He wrote that on Aug 24, 1941, aboard what he described as a "G-D-mn" train bound for infantry training at Camp Wolters, Texas. The attack on Pearl Harbor was less than four months away. Johnny Skelton's fate was about to become a 53-year mystery.

"Well, I am in Texas now. It is hotter than the devil".

Johnny Skelton wrote that on Aug 30, 1941. He'd been drafted into the Army and didn't mind going. He'd worked in a mill after dropping out of Santa Clara High School north of Eugene, but America was still coming out of the Depression and jobs were shaky.

"I think I have a steady job with the government now. I have just about decided to join the regular Army and go to the islands".

He wrote that on Sept. 6, 1941, after discovering career soldiers were a breed apart from the stumbling draftees he was stuck with. 'They have what they call the 'awkward squad' for guys who are so dumb they can't tell their right foot from their left", he wrote to his sister, Lucille Bowman, and her husband, Clifton.

"They make them carry about a 10 pound rock in their left hand so they can tell them apart", he wrote. " That's the honest to God truth."

Johnny Skelton figured he could join the regular Army, go to the Philippines and maybe make sergeant in six to eight months. He enjoyed the regimentation, the officers were "sure enough swell guys," and he expected to qualify as an expert rifleman.

He'd always been one to plan ahead and take care of things. He was the oldest of the Skelton children and looked after Lucille, Tom, Helen and Aura.

Lucille recalls picking cherries with him when she was young. When she got tired and cranky he'd tell her, "Lucille, it's OK If you want to take a little nap over there."

"When I woke up, I'd see my bucket had more cherries in it than when I went to sleep," she says.

"He'd always worry about the rest of us kids first," she says. "He took being the oldest very seriously."

"Well, kids, how are you making it? I hear you have been doing pretty well. They say you have named him John... is that right?"

Johnny Skelton wrote that on Oct. 1, 1941. Lucille Bowman had given birth to a son and named him after her brother, who was in Fresno, Calif., waiting to ship out to the Philippines.

The war in Europe had been raging for two years and Japan was on the march in Asia. The United States was not yet at war, but it was in the wind.

U.S. troops stationed in the Pacific were ill-equipped. They still wore World War I-style helmets and carried bolt-action Springfield rifles. They wore leather leggings and wool uniforms.

Johnny Skelton wrote that it would take at least 28 days to reach the Philippines by boat.

"It is going to be a good adventure," he wrote. "When I get to the Philippines I will write you kids more and send you pictures and souvenirs. Pass this letter around to the other kids and tell everybody to drop a line sometime. I have went about 6,000 miles since I saw you kids last. Have several thousand more to go. Well, I wish you luck. Your brother, Johnny. (P.S) Be sure and take good care of the young one.

That was the last Lucille Bowman heard from her brother. The Japanese fell upon Pearl Harbor and, in rapid fashion, knocked out U.S. and Filipino forces in the Philippines. Corregidor, a two-square-mile rock island at

the entrance to Manila Bay, was the last outpost to fall. U.S. and Filipino soldiers there surrendered in May 1942. PFC John Skelton was listed as missing. After about three years, the Army declared him dead.

"All these years, we wondered what really happened," Lucille Bowman says. "If he'd survived Corregidor, he would have been on the Bataan Death March. I always felt sure that if he was a prisoner, he wouldn't have been one for long. He wouldn't think it was right, and he wouldn't put up with it, and they would have killed him."