

## A Moment of Valor: Letters to Home

By Sonny Hays-Eberts

Instead of an interview, I want to include a letter written home that I keep in my militaria collection. Letters provide intimate snapshots of life during war. My information about Don Nelson comes from a collection of letters, records and photos purchased on eBay. Consequently, much of his background is extrapolated and may not be entirely correct.

As far as I can tell, Don entered the Army in 1943 and served in the 124<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment of the 31<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division. Besides the infantry, he also served in Supply/Logistics and eventually in the Judge Advocate Generals office. He may have been at the Nurnberg War Crimes trials, as there is a train ticket to Nurnberg and photos of the MPs outside the building. He eventually retired from the Army in 1951 as a Major.

*France, August 25, 1944*

*Dear Mother and Dad –*

*I have moved a long way into France since I last wrote to you – and just yesterday that three of your letters caught up with me. The last was dated August 12<sup>th</sup> – so you can see we are getting pretty good service.*

*We have moved fast lately and as a consequence we know little of the news. All we have is a picture of the local situation – and that is good. I guess the overall picture of the news is also good.*

*It is hard to realize that many of the officers that I joked and drank with such a short time ago are no longer with us. Many of them had just gotten married before they came across and that makes their departure all the more sad. I certainly hope that their sacrifice has not been in vain.*

*I am still O.K. and hope this finds you the same. I'm sorry Dave is not coming this way, but I believe I am too far in the interior of France for him to see me. Love, Don.*

Pat Edwards related the history of local people when she published *The Lorane Historian*. Here is a letter she included:

*Dear Mr. & 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, theater, 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 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 15 or 20--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 semicircle. I found one body facing the others in the semicircle 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 back side 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 fore finger 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 hometown 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*

John was a member of the extended Skelton family that moved to Lorane from California in 1917 and 1918. Three Skelton brothers, John, Bud, and Jim, and their two Mitchell brothers-in-law, Tom and Bill, formed the Skelton-Mitchell Lumber Co. The Skeltons oversaw the running of the mill and the Mitchells supervised the logging operation.

- P. E.