

# The Death of Col. John Oliver Hoskins

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My grandmother once told me that the moon had let her down. She explained that she told my grandfather when he shipped out in October 1941 to help prepare the defenses of the Philippines for a possible war with Japan, she would send her love each night with the help of the moon - he would only need to look up at the moon and know her love was with him. And, she said, once he had gone, she began to ask the moon to protect him and watch over him for her. My grandfather would be declared missing in action after the Battle of Bataan. For the rest of the war, my grandmother would not know if he was dead or alive. Had he died in the fighting or endured the death march that followed? Eventually she would learn from a Filipino witness that he had been shot during the fighting but that his body had not been found. The memorial at Fort William McKinley to commemorate those that fought in the Philippines lists Colonel John Oliver Hoskins as missing. He was awarded the Purple Heart and the Legion of Merit medal.

My grandmother would never know the circumstances of my grandfather's death. She only knew the moon had let her down.

John died in January 1942 during the first American land battle of the Pacific war. Over 60 years later, a book titled "Tears in the Darkness: The Story of the Bataan Death March and Its Aftermath," by Michael and Elizabeth Norman, tells the story of how he died. A family friend reading the book in 2009 recognized that this story belonged to our family and contacted my sister to let her know what he had found.

The following excerpt is from that book:

*On the west coast of Bataan, a separate Japanese force, some 5,000 men, had also been trying to push south. Here there was no beach, so the infantry had to take to the hills above the water. The hills were heavily forested, a hard and tangled hinterland with deep ravines, sudden drops, and breakneck gorges.*

*A single serpentine road, the West Road, had been cut into the face of the hills. The road began at Morong, and on January 14, that's where the main Japanese push south started.*

*Most of the fighting took place along the ridges, hogbacks, saddles, spurs, and ledges that looked down on the West Road, the only route to bring up supplies, weapons, and*

equipment. If the Japanese could fight their way down the West Road and through the heights above it to Bagac, roughly halfway down the peninsula, then pivot east and push across the East-West Road, they could turn the American Flank and attack the enemy from the front and side simultaneously.

By January 17, the west coast force, the Kimura Detachment (named for the general who commanded it), had taken Morong and was starting to move south. Four days later at midmorning, part of the 3rd Battalion, 20th Infantry managed to slip undetected through the American line and set up a roadblock behind the enemy's front on the West Road. The Japanese officer in charge of the position, Lt. Minobu Kawaguchi, was just starting to reconnoiter his front when he heard the sound of vehicles approaching and quickly ordered his men to slip back into the woods and wait.

Coming around the bend now were two armored vehicles, half-tracks mounted with machine guns. The lieutenant let the half-tracks pass, too much firepower, but somewhat behind them was a plain black sedan with two men inside, two American soldiers, a driver and, in the front seat next to him, a much older man.

The driver had his window down, and when the car came abreast of Kawaguchi and his men, they fired point-blank.

The driver slumped forward, the sedan ran off the road into a culvert, and the older man stumbled out of the passenger side and tried to take cover behind a fallen tree.

Earlier in the day headquarters had sent word it wanted prisoners, so the lieutenant tried to coax the older soldier out of hiding. "Anata-wa Nippon-gun ni hou sareteiru," "You are surrounded by the Japanese Army," he shouted in Japanese. Then, in English, he yelled, "Hold up hands. Come out!"

The American gave no answer at first, then he unholstered a pistol and fired a few rounds in Kawaguchi's direction. The lieutenant was impressed. The older man's position was hopeless - surely he could see that - and yet he was fighting back.

Kawaguchi tried again. "Hold up hands. Come out!" But the old one answered with another volley of pistol fire. Headquarters, it seemed would have to find another prisoner. Kawaguchi raised his rifle, took aim at the man's chest, and pulled the trigger. Later that day when the rest of the battalion arrived, the lieutenant and a communications officer went through the American's pockets. His papers identified

*him as Colonel John Hoskins, commander of American artillery on the west coast. Ho-skins, Hoe-skins . . . Lieutenant Kawaguchi made an effort to memorize the name.*

*After the war, he thought, he might try to find the man's family and tell them how bravely he'd fought, how well he had died. Then he ordered his men to dig a grave, and there beneath a luan tree by the side of the West Road, the hohei of the 20th Infantry buried John Hoskins, Colonel, United States Army.*

After we all had a chance to read the passage and discuss what we had learned, my brother Keith decided to contact the authors and let them know we would be interested in any more information they might have. This is the reply he received from Michael Norman on Nov. 12, 2009:

*Mr. Hoskins,*

*Thank you for your note. Everything we know about your grandfather and his death is in the book. We held no detail back, including Lt. Kawaguchi's admiration for your grandfather. Believe me, it was very rare indeed for a Japanese infantry unit to take the time to bury a keto -- their word for a disgusting white Westerner. So they showed your grandfather great honor and great respect. For a while I wondered why your grandfather returned fire instead of surrendering. All we can do, of course is wonder. He was an artillery commander, a colonel, which made him more of an administrator than a front-line fighting man. But he clearly had the instincts and heart of a fighting man. His car was surrounded by crack Japanese infantry; he likely knew well that as soon as he fired his .45 at them, they were going to return fire, and at that range, close range, they would not miss. And that is why the Japanese admired him. He refused to surrender, and to them such an act was the ultimate mark of a warrior. 76,000 men surrendered on Bataan. John Hoskins was not one of them.*

It was remarkable and so unexpected to get not only the story of what happened to our grandfather, but to get the details of his death and "disappearance" from the Japanese soldier responsible.