



Charlie Johnson, left, and Bill Hughes look over copies of the letters and drawings Johnson was able to return to a family in Japan with help from Hughes.

Special to the Reporter-Herald/
MIKE FOLEY

Lost in battle

Loveland veteran returns unearthed wartime letters to Japanese family

By MIKE FOLEY
FOR THE REPORTER-HERALD

Charlie Johnson received quite a surprise one morning in 1965, when he discovered a box in a compartment in a staircase.

He was helping demolish an old home for a building salvage company in Minneapolis, and his task that day was to remove any recyclable fixtures and woodwork.

After blowing the dust from the box, he opened it to find a jumble of old pocket watches and watch parts. Underneath the timepieces was a bundle of letters.

Charlie took the box to his boss, who, after looking over the contents, told Charlie to keep the letters — he'd take the watches.

Later that day, going through the letters, Charlie found some written in 1944 that were addressed to a soldier, Pvt. William Morgenstern of Minneapolis.

Based on what he read, Morgenstern, a Marine, had served in the South Pacific in the battles for Tarawa and Guadalcanal and was wounded.

But, more surprising were the other documents in the bundle, written in what Charlie assumed to be Japanese characters.

These included several postcards, with obviously duplicated messages — reproduced form letters from Japanese schoolchildren to soldiers.

Delving a little deeper into the packet, Charlie found an envelope containing a child's drawings of a

Japanese warplane and a letter.

After going through the materials, Charlie put the bundle away and forgot about it until he and his wife, Larene, moved to Loveland in 2005.

Last year, he showed the letters to a friend, fellow member of Gateway Baptist Church and fellow veteran Bill Hughes. (Bill served in the U.S. Air Force, and Charlie in the U.S. Naval Reserve).

After Bill had a chance to look at them, he suggested that Charlie try to return them to their families.

Charlie began with the Marine from Minneapolis, Pvt. Morgenstern.

After a search on the Internet and a few phone calls, he reached the soldier's brother in a nursing home.

He told Charlie that his brother had died, and he wasn't interested in the letters.

Next was the more daunting task, the Japanese documents.

He began on the Internet, finding the English-language site for the Hiroshima Peace Memorial.

Taking a chance, he sent a brief e-mail describing what he'd found, and explained that he'd like to return the materials to the soldiers' families.

He also sent scans of the letters and the drawing.

That started the ball rolling, and with the help of some interested Japanese Internet users, Charlie was able to track down the young artist, Masao Yoshida, who created the airplane drawing, in Tokyo, Japan.

Now 73, Yoshida is the nephew of the soldier, Haruzo Iwabuchi, to

whom the drawing was sent, who was killed on Guadalcanal in 1944.

Because the American Marine had letters addressed to several Japanese soldiers, Charlie speculated that he'd found them at a Japanese command post.

A correspondence began, and Charlie soon returned the letters and drawings to Yoshida.

Yoshida reported that his family was thrilled to get the materials back. Along with his sincere thanks, he has sent Charlie many mementos from Japan.

Yoshida recently told Charlie: "I placed the 12 letters to Haruzo Iwabuchi in front of my mother's picture and told her that her brother's letters came back."

He went on to add: "My mother must be happy in heaven. Above all, Haruzo was her favorite among her siblings. This is all thanks to you, Charlie."

Charlie and Masao Yoshida correspond regularly now and have become friends.

When asked why it was so important to return the material addressed to a Japanese soldier, when in 1944 Japan was an enemy of the United States, Bill replied, "Even though Haruzo Iwabuchi was an enemy soldier, his family grieved as any Allied family did at the loss of their loved one. It was the right thing to do. It brings closure and some humanism to a terrible time."

So, two old veterans completed a task a long time overdue and gave closure to a family thousands of miles away.

"It was the right thing to do."