Finding aid for the Johnny Tolbert letters 6089

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Language of Material: English
Contributing Institution: USC Libraries Special Collections
Title: Johnny Tolbert letters
creator: Tolbert, Johnny
Identifier/Call Number: 6089
Physical Description: 0.58 Linear Feet1 box
Date (inclusive): 1943-1946
Abstract: The Johnny Tolbert letters is a collection of 151 letters and four Western Union telegrams sent from United States Army soldier Johnny Tolbert (1924-1989), also known as Johnnie Clifton or J.C., to Ruth Mae Clennell (1925-2000) from San Pedro, California between 1943-1946. Tolbert met Clennell on September 2, 1943, the night before his deployment to the South Pacific. Tolbert's love and affection for Clennell and his feelings of homesickness are the main themes of the letters, though his letters also touch upon the events of the Second World War, observations of local natives, and attitudes toward the Japanese that are reflective of the time period. The collection also includes original envelopes with stamps and Army examiner markings, postcards, newspaper clippings, and print ephemera.

Biographical / Historical
Johnny (or Johnnie) Clifton Tolbert was born on March 28, 1924 in Blount County, Alabama to Lawrence C. Tolbert and Flora M. Layton. He was the oldest of six children. On February 23, 1943, he enlisted as a soldier for the United States Army in Fort McClellan, Alabama. He was deployed September 3, 1943 to the South Pacific as part of the 245th Port Company. Throughout the Second World War, he was stationed in Australia, New Guinea, New Britain, and the Philippines, where he participated in a beach invasion. After the Japanese surrendered, Tolbert was sent to Leyte, Okinawa, and Shanghai, where he guarded Japanese prisoners. After Shanghai, Tolbert finally came back home to the United States. He arrived first in Honolulu, and then in Seattle on December 24, 1945. By the time Tolbert married Ruth Clennell on March 30, 1946, Tolbert had been discharged and had moved to Birmingham. They married in Birmingham, where Tolbert worked at the Haverty Furniture Company. Eventually, by 1952, Johnny and Ruth Tolbert moved to San Pedro, California, where Johnny was employed as a ship clerk and salesman while Ruth stayed at home as a homemaker. They remained married until Tolbert's death. Johnny Clifton Tolbert died on June 1, 1989 in Los Angeles, California. He was buried in Green Hills Memorial Park in Los Angeles, California, where Ruth was later buried as well after her death on January 3, 2000.

Scope and Contents
The Johnny Tolbert letters consists of 151 letters and four Western Union telegrams sent between 1943-1946 from Johnny Tolbert (1924-1989), to Ruth Mae Clennell (1925-2000), who would later become his wife, during his tour of duty as a soldier in the Second World War. The letters are accompanied by their original envelopes bearing stamps and Army examiner markings, along with occasional postcards, newspaper clippings, and print ephemera Tolbert included with his letters.

Tolbert primarily writes of his love for Clennell and his feelings of homesickness, though he also briefly mentions events of the Second World War, observations of local natives, and his attitudes toward the Japanese, which are reflective of the time period.

The letters are organized chronologically and are kept with their original envelopes, as well as any other clippings or print ephemera Tolbert included.

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Purchased from The Bookshop, September 30, 2014.

Preferred Citation
[Box/folder no. or item name], Johnny Tolbert letters, Collection no. 6089, Special Collections, USC Libraries, University of Southern California

Subjects and Indexing Terms
Japanese -- Attitudes -- 20th century -- Archival resources
Racism -- 20th century -- Archival resources
Tolbert's first letters to Clennell since being deployed to Australia and New Guinea. His letters mention deaths of soldiers he knew well. Along with the letters, there are two newspaper clippings of poems that were attached to the December 26, 1943 letter to Clennell.

Tolbert writes from New Guinea and then the Southwest Pacific. His letters mention his loneliness, sadness, and jealousy over Clennell. Although unclear, Tolbert’s tone toward Clennell is at times full of machoism and violent language. Tolbert’s letters also include his observations of a local New Zealand performance, which includes derogatory language. Most notable in this file is a business card with the name of “Ensley Loan Company” on the front and “Special Hunting License on Yellow Belly Japs: Season opened December 7, 1941 (No Limit), Good until extermination.” on the back. It is included in the January 21, 1944 letter. The January 27, 1944 letter includes a newspaper clipping of a soldier’s joke.

Tolbert’s letters from the Southwest Pacific mention his homesickness, especially at seeing John Wayne and other stars arrive to perform a show. Tolbert also mentions a friend going home for a visit after serving in North Africa. References to the Japanese, fellow soldiers, and his mother are also included. A plastic strip that was signed by the Army Examiner is included in the February 16, 1944 letters.

Tolbert’s letters indicate disillusionment as a soldier in the Southwest Pacific. He talks about fighting for some “big shot back there” and fears job scarcity after the war. Correspondence with Clennell also refers to her sickness. There are brief references to friends back home and the Japanese.

Tolbert’s letters arrive from the South Pacific. His letters mostly mention friends and family from home.
Box 1, Folder 6  **1944 May Letters 1944-05**  
**Scope and Contents**  
Tolbert continues to write from his post in the Southwest Pacific. His tone to Clennell continues to reflect affection with a tinge of violent language. Tolbert's letters indicate his worries over his mother's possible operation. His May 28, 1944 letter reflects a racist attitude toward the Japanese through the violent language used.

Box 1, Folder 7  **1944 June Letters 1944-06**  
**Scope and Contents**  
Tolbert's letters are written from New Britain. He continues to mention his loneliness and reveals his father's drinking problem. His tone toward Clennell continues to be affectionate but with an element of machoism. In one of the most outwardly racism sentiments expressed toward the Japanese, Tolbert writes in his June 7, 1944 letter: "japs the dirty dogs. They just aren't human. At least the Germans are humans. But humans or not they won't last long." Despite this, he hopes to visit Tokyo before the war ends.

Box 1, Folder 8  **1944 July Letters 1944-07**  
**Scope and Contents**  
Tolbert's letters from New Britain mentions his photos of "natives". His letters also indicate that he has heard of the bombing in Japan. This file contains poems and newspaper clippings.

Box 1, Folder 9  **1944 August Letters 1944-08**  
**Scope and Contents**  
Tolbert primarily writes of homesickness and missing Clennell. The letters in this file start mentioning engagement and marriage.

Box 1, Folder 10  **1944 September Letters 1944-09**  
**Scope and Contents**  
Tolbert starts to write more about the future and his return to home. His letters start to mention the war and his life in the army less as he looks toward the future.

Box 1, Folder 11  **1944 October Letters 1944-10**  
**Scope and Contents**  
Tolbert continues to write of returning home after the war and relays to Clennel information he has received about his family. Little notes are written on the back sides of the letters, presumably to be on the front when folded up.

Box 1, Folder 12  **1944 November Letters 1944-11**  
**Scope and Contents**  
Tolbert writes to Clennell about his family and responds to her news about her family. Includes a newspaper clipping of a cartoon with racist overtones.

Box 1, Folder 13  **1944 December Letters 1944-12**  
**Scope and Contents**  
Tolbert letters mention home and assures Clennell to not worry about him.
| Box 1, Folder 14 | **1945 January Letters 1944-01** |
| **Scope and Contents** |
| Tolbert mentions leaving his current area but is vague about whether he knows or just cannot say where he is going next. He writes that he wishes he could be home and that he just finished his last invasion. In his last letter in January 1945, written on Japanese paper, Tolbert confirms that he is in the Philippines and admits being scared in the invasion. His letter describes locals he met as a “swell” and “happiest bunch.” |

| Box 1, Folder 15 | **1945 February Letters 1945-02** |
| **Scope and Contents** |
| Tolbert writes from the Philippines about missing Clennell and tells her not to worry about him. He also discusses the future and wonders what job prospects he will have when he returns from the war. |

| Box 1, Folder 16 | **1945 April -December Letters 1945-04-1945-12** |
| **Scope and Contents** |
| Tolbert’s letters in this folder are sent from the Philippines, Japan, and China. This folder also includes two Western Union telegrams that Tolbert sent to Clennell from Hawaii and Washington. Tolbert briefly mentions guarding Japanese prisoners, but mostly writes about Clennell and going home to the United States. |

| Box 1, Folder 17 | **1946 January Letters 1946-01** |
| **Scope and Contents** |
| This folder includes two Western Union telegrams and three letters. In the second telegram, Tolbert writes to Clennell that he received his discharge. |

| Box 1, Folder 18 | **1946 February Letters 1946-02** |
| **Scope and Contents** |
| Tolbert’s letters from Alabama mention his anger toward a man named Eddie, hinting at a possible romantic entanglement between Clennell and Eddie, as well as his job in Alabama, which prevents him from traveling to meet Clennell’s family. Tolbert also writes about the difficulty of adjusting to civilian life. |

| Box 1, Folder 19 | **1946 March Letters 1946-03** |
| **Scope and Contents** |
| Tolbert’s letters are sent from Alabama. This folder includes the only letter in the collection sent to someone other than Clennell, a Mrs. Robinson. The envelope is addressed to Clennell and the letter is about Clennell and adjusting to civilian life. |

| Box 1, Folder 20 | **Postcards and Ephemera 1944-06-1945-01** |
| **Scope and Contents** |
| This folder contained both dated and undated ephemera including postcards from various states, a notecard, and a blank page of stationery. |