

Newsweek

MAY 18, 1942

Wainwright of Corregidor: A Comrade's Tribute

by

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From the casemates of Corregidor* came a simple statement last week. "My conscience would not let me leave before the final curtain. I'll stay with my men."

Those were the words of Jonathan M. Wainwright, a lieutenant general to the rest of the world but just plain "Skinny" to all of us who know him well.

Wainwright must be given credit for avoiding the surrender of Corregidor when Bataan fell. His remaining away from Bataan during those trying days, and whatever instructions he gave to Major General King, who conducted the surrender of the peninsula forces, saved Corregidor for a time. And in this achievement he was most fortunate, since Bataan and Corregidor—in fact, all of the Philippines—was one command.

It is still not clear why the Japanese did not force Wainwright to surrender all of his forces at the time of Bataan. However, the Japanese evidently learned their lesson, for they made no second mistake of this kind. When Wainwright sought terms for his Corregidor command the Japanese imposed, as a condition, immediate surrender of the scattered American and Filipino forces operating on the various islands of the archipelago.

Wainwright never had a fighting chance in his last command in the Philippines. He fell heir to a lost cause in the midst of battle. But in those last few days he demonstrated his fine soldierly demeanor, leadership, courage, and resourcefulness. And these knightly qualities, for which he was famous, won for him the confidence and affection of his men and the soubriquet of "the most front-going general."

Skinny is every inch the polo-playing cavalry type of his period not only with those long legs which bow just a bit but with that debonair air of a knight errant of old. He is definitely in the class of good fellows, enjoys his club life, holds his cards fairly well, can toss down a man-sized drink with ease, and definitely understands the art of throwing African dominoes.

But the man Wainwright, whom this observer has known for 30 years and alongside of whom he served while on

*Spanish for judge; also the designation of a legendary character of Filipino folklore.

Wainwright of Corregidor

duty with troops, needs no headlines to bring military fame and honors to his name. At 22 he was commissioned in the cavalry, and his outstanding ability immediately gained recognition.

Wainwright's Army school training tells the factual story of his distinguished career better than any word description of his service. He graduated from the Mounted Service School, first year course, and later the advanced course; Chemical Warfare School; General Staff School in France; Command and General Staff School, and the Army War College. All of these school assignments were selective and in most cases competitive.

Perhaps the best evidence of Wainwright's outstanding service is found in his being awarded the Distinguished Service Medal and his being placed on the General Staff List at the end of the last war. Moreover, his personal bravery, shown in the recent campaign in the Philippines, gained for him the Distinguished Service Cross.

But long before Wainwright's service began as an officer, he was particularly known for his honor winnings. He graduated from West Point with the highest military honor—"First Captain of the Corps of Cadets." His classmates 36 years ago wrote of him in their annual "Howitzer":

Corporal, Sergeant Major, 1st Sergeant, 1st Captain, Hop Manager, Marksman, Toastmaster of his class.

This is IT, the goal of every good cadet's ambition.

Many honors have been heaped upon Skinny's head, so many that it's a wonder his slender frame has withstood their bending moment without any more damage than giving to his knees a permanent set.

When the news flashed that Corregidor had fallen, the memories of thousands of servicemen who have shipped that way must have gone back to the island fortress. And it is fairly certain that these veterans of old, when they heard the last tragic story from the Philippines, looked back and thought of that grim sentinel of Manila Bay baptized in the sweat, blood, and tears of Americans and Filipinos, as "Skinny's Rock," and of the hero of its closing days as "Wainwright of Corregidor."