

Herman Johnson

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Herman Johnson

Today is April 12th, 1994. My name is Phyllis Gordon. I am a volunteer with the Midway Village and Museum Center which is cooperating with a state wide effort to collect oral histories of Illinois citizens which participated in the events surrounding World War II. We are in the North Suburban District Library in Loves Park, Illinois. We are interviewing Mr. Herman Johnson who served in a branch of the United States Armed Forces during World War II. We are interviewing him about his experiences in that war.

G: Mr. Johnson would you please start just by introducing yourself to us.

J: All right. Herman Jerome Johnson. I was born in Rockford, Illinois, on May 17, 1926.

G: We would also like to have the names of each of your parents.

J: All Right. My father's name was Oscar Johnson and my mother's name was Molly Johnson.

G: Did you have any brothers or sisters?

J: No.

G: Are there any details about your parents or your family that you would like to give at this time?

J: My parents were both immigrants from Norway. My father came over in 1913; my mother came in 1925.

G: Well. What was life like for you before the war and specifically if you can think back to 1941?

J: I was in high school at East High in Rockford, Illinois. I remember the construction at Camp Grant. I remember going downtown on State Street and seeing all the army fellows on passes from Camp Grant on the State Street Bridge. I don't recall if gas rationing had started then, but I remember my father had coupons and he would get 5 gallons of gasoline a week to drive back and forth to work.

G: Well. What thoughts did you have about the war before the United States became directly involved in the conflict?

J: Not too much although I was interested in aviation and the stories and the pictures of the German and the English airplanes that interested me a lot.

G: Did you hear about Pearl Harbor? Where were you and what were you doing at that time?

J: It was Sunday afternoon at home. My parents and I were listening to the radio. They interrupted whatever program was on and the announcement came on. I know we were quite shocked and it was somewhat quiet in the house for a little while. We all listened to see what was going on.

G: You all knew it meant serious trouble.

J: Right.

G: Had you formed any prior opinion or developed any feeling about what was taking place in either Europe or Asia?

J: I think I felt that the Germans were wrong. Of course, they did invade my parents' homeland and that was a dastardly act and so we didn't __?__. As far as Asia goes

I suppose that would be more removed from my thoughts at that time.

G: Do you recall reading any newspaper accounts about the German aggression in Europe?

J: Not specifically. But I do recall reading the Rockford paper and the Chicago Herald American got at that time on weekends.

G: Did you have any knowledge about Hitler, his speeches, his ideas, his actions?

J: I might have but I don't recall—as a teenager, it wasn't quite uppermost in my mind.

G: I don't think we knew too much.

J: No.

G: What is it that led to your entry in the military service? Were you drafted or did you volunteer?

J: I was not drafted. In early spring of '44, a friend of mine and I took the Air Force mental test, they called it. A knowledge test and we passed that. Then we went to Camp Grant for a physical and I did not make that. I had a broken nose once and I couldn't be in high altitudes. I knew I would have to go because I would be 18 in May in '44. I tried the Marine Corp. They didn't want me because my eyes weren't quite good enough so I decided to enlist in the Navy, because I'd rather be in the Navy so I did that instead in the spring of '44.

G: Was your response to entering the Navy influenced by your family and friends attitudes towards the war or the threat to the national security or any other consideration?

J: I think I knew I would be going ...

G: You knew you were going to go, so ...

J: And I would be drafted. I didn't have any reservations about being drafted, but I just thought I would prefer the Navy.

G: Have some choice.

J: Yes.

G: When and where were you inducted?

J: Great Lakes. No. Chicago. No, wait a minute. I enlisted in Rockford, physical in Chicago and I suppose the induction center and the boot camp was at Great Lakes, Illinois.

G: Do you have any special memories of that event?

J: I remember all the bodies at the physical examination in a big building in Chicago

G: How old were you?

J: I was 18.

G: What happened after you were inducted?

J: We were sent to Great Lakes and we spent 4 or 5 weeks at boot camp, as they call it, preliminary training, which was very interesting. Since I had had ROTC in high school, I knew all about marching and the rifle and that kind of thing and calisthenics so that helped me a lot.

G: Where did you take your basic military training?

J: In Great Lakes.

G: What were you trained to do?

J: That was basic training, and then again, tests, ability tests and I was sent with others to Iowa State College for electrical training, to be a Naval electrician and that was 4 months of college courses on electricity and engineering.

G: What did you think of the training?

J: It was very good.

G: Did anything special happen there?

J: No, it was a very nice experience, because I went in the Navy before I graduated from high school, a half year early. The courses I took at Iowa State and my grades were enough to give me credit for high school graduation with my class and it also gave me quite a few credits toward college.

G: That was good. Tell us about any other training camp you attended.

J: After Iowa State, a group of us were sent to an Amphibian Training Base. I think it was Camp Bradford, Virginia outside of Norfolk and that was to be trained as crew members on the LST landing ship, naval landing ship and that was the training I received there.

G: Did you have any leaves or passes? And if so how did you use them?

J: I think I had a few days after basic training at Great Lakes and then a few days after the completion of the courses at Iowa State before going to Virginia.

G: Did you come home then?

J: Yes, I came home. Yes, I came home.

G: What do you call this period about the places where you were stationed or the

friends you made or your association with civilians?

J: Coming home on leave in those two instances was very nice, a young sailor in uniform. It was quite fun to see my old friends in Rockford. Civilians, especially travelling, on the trains. We would stop at certain stations and the Red Cross, or whatever, the women would come with donuts and coffee and we would be leaning out the windows. The civilians were very nice to us.

G: Sometimes sandwiches they say, too.

J: I don't recall that but it was quite nice.

G: What was your military unit?

J: I don't quite understand.

G: Some were assigned to a division or a certain infantry division.

J: Well, I suppose the Navy—Could I take a few minutes to explain? I suppose the Navy is different. After this amphibian training in Virginia, they found they didn't need any people for crews for these particular ships. They did send some of us down to Trinidad. We kind of waited there for several months. Then 5 or 6 of us were sent to San Juan, Puerto Rico. At that place, on the naval base, 3 of us were trained to be radio teletype technicians repair persons. And so that's I was part of an electrician and a radio teletype station at San Juan.

G: Where did you go after completing this basic training?

J: Stayed in San Juan as a repair technician.

G: What did you think of the nation's war efforts up to this point?

J: It seemed it was very good. I remember writing letters about the fact that they had to save cans and a real effort made at home to help out.

G: You were never sent into combat?

J: No, I was very fortunate.

G: I should say. Did you write many letters home?

J: Probably once a week.

G: Did you receive many letters, and/or packages?

J: My mother would send letters and cookies and try to send cakes. Of course they were crumbs but everybody ate them

G: Did most of the other men write and receive letters?

J: I believe so. Yes.

G: Have you remained in contact with any of your World War II companions?

J: No, I never heard from them after leaving the service.

G: Were you aware of any civilian concentration camps at that time?

J: I don't think so, no.

G: Can you remember what you and the other men did to celebrate traditional holidays, such as Thanksgiving or Christmas?

J: They would serve a special turkey dinner is all in the dining rooms and then there would usually be a movie in the evening. That's probably about all. There wasn't too much activity.

G: Were you ever entertained by Hollywood entertainers that sometimes came around?

J: I can't recall them ever coming to where I was stationed at that time. Apparently Puerto Rico was kind of off the beaten track and it was so close to the United States that I assume they didn't think it was that important.

G: When and how did you return to the United States after the end of the war?

J: Through the point system. It took me 'til June—last part of June 1946. I stayed in San Juan, Puerto Rico. We were flown back to Fort __?__ in Brooklyn. We were sent on a train back to Great Lakes. I remember I walked into the door at home on 4th of July, 1946.

G: Tell about your military rank and decorations.

J: Well, we were—My rank was what you called Fireman First Class. I was supposed to be a sergeant, perhaps. There were no decorations given out for these stations in Puerto Rico.

G: How did you get along with the men with whom you had the greatest contact?

J: I think we got along fine. We were companions when we went out in the evenings. The base we were on, there were just 30 people there. They had quite an expansive USO in San Juan. We shopped __?__ and [bottomless girls]. From time to time the base planned picnics at beaches, dances and so on. We just had a nice time.

G: Have you ever been back to Puerto Rico?

J: No. Never.

G: Were there any things you would do differently if you could do it once again?

J: Regarding the service?

G: Regarding the service.

J: No. If I couldn't fly, which I desperately wanted to do, I think the Navy is probably the best place.

G: Is there anything that stands out from your years of military service?

J: Okay. One thing in 1944, April, we were on a ship going from Virginia to Trinidad. There were about 5 or 6 hundred sailors and British soldiers and sailors and we were headed down toward the Caribbean. In the Caribbean the engines of the ship stopped. Dead silence. They announced that Franklin Roosevelt had died.

G: Oh.

J: There was just dead silence. Nobody said a word for about 10 minutes. It was just very quiet. I think they played Taps on the loud speaker system started talking about what was going to happen then. We were quite concerned because our leader was gone. That was the most outstanding thing.

G: That was an interesting memory. How did you learn about VE Day and what was your reaction to that?

J: Well, it was a nice evening. We were watching a movie. They stopped the movie and they announced it one evening about what was happening in Europe. That was all. A lot of cheering and clapping and that was all.

G: How did you hear about VJ Day and what was your reaction to that?

J: It must not have been that important. I think we were there, still in the service and completely involved in that. As I recall, there wasn't that much of a celebration on the base.

G: What was your opinion about the use of the atomic bomb when it was used against the Japanese in August of 1945?

J: My thinking at that time?

G: At that time.

J: Surprised and shocked but I think we did it probably a lot sooner than expected. I talked to a lot of people, a lot of sailors, that had been over in the Pacific on LST ships that I had been training for. They would tell us, coming to the beaches where Japanese controlled the islands ... These ships were being destroyed by the score by mines and running up and it was complete mayhem couldn't make it when they tried to hit beaches.

G: Has that opinion changed over the last 50 years?

J: No, not at all.

G: When and where were you officially discharged? I think you sort of covered that.

J: Great Lakes Naval Station.

G: The year would be ...

J: 1946.

G: Do you have any kind of disability rating?

J: No.

G: Or a pension?

J: No.

G: Do you have any opinions or feelings about our nation's military status today or its policies?

J: That's a leading question.

G: I've been getting some leading answers, too.

J: I bet you have. Well I think we should keep a certain amount of strength and a certain amount of stock, developing and maintaining our equipment in our Armed Forces. The way the world is today one doesn't know and I don't think we should give away score yet.

G: It seems to be a war going on somewhere all the time.

J: I kind of thought we should not have been in Vietnam. That was kind of a ___?___ situation. And I think what we did in Somalia was kind of a waste because nothing was accomplished and I'm worried about what is going to happen Saudi.

G: Right. Do you have any contact with the Veterans' Administration?

J: No.

G: What is your opinion of the Veterans' Administration, if you had contact?

J: No, I wouldn't even make a guess.

G: Have you ever gone to a VA Hospital?

J: No.

G: Would you like to tell us how your family supported you during your years in the

service. By giving you moral support by letters and packages.

J I think so. My parents were quite disturbed when I left. After being out of state position and that kind of thing. The last time I saw them for a long time—I saw them was almost 2 years. They certainly did support me with letters and pictures from home, cookies and good stuff. I know my mother belonged to the—She had a star in the window and all those things.

G: Navy Mothers.

J: Navy Mothers. Yes, she went to meetings. Yes, that's what it was. Navy Mothers.

G: In subsequent years what has that support meant to you?

J; Well, I had good feeling about having been in service and it was not a thing I should not have done. I was lucky to have been sent where was and not having to see ...

G: Combat.

J: Yeah.

G: Is there anything else you would like to tell us at this time about your years in the Navy.

J: I heard a lot about these operations and work that ___?___ teletype organization in San Juan was interesting. That was the—San Juan, Puerto Rico was the headquarters for the Tenth Naval District. The Tenth Naval District's job was to put a screen near the entrance of the Panama Canal to guard it from German submarines because there were German submarines in the Caribbean and even in Chesapeake.

G: I wouldn't doubt it.

J: That was very interesting. We had direct radio communications with Washington, D. C. My job and the others on our staff were to keep these ___?___operating.

G: Did you have any contact with the civilians in Puerto Rico down there?

J: Yes, we had 30 people on our little base and we had 3 Puerto Rican cooks who were fantastic and we had, because we were a small base, we had what we called subsistence, so much extra a month and the cooks could shop at the public markets. We'd come for breakfast and you ordered what you want—fabulous pork roast, beef roast. The food was absolutely superb. We had civilian women who did our laundry We paid, of course, at that time and we had young women, in San Juan, were very friendly to the Navy. Some of the civilian men, younger men, didn't care too much about us because ...

G: Little competition.

J: Little competition, I would say. Otherwise the shops, the stores, the USO, the bus when we went on tour, historic things, everybody was friendly.

G: When you got back to the United States, when you were discharged, did you back to school then?

J: No, as I said I finished high school and graduated. Going to various offices discharge for discharge, one of the people says, "Are you going to college"? I said, "Oh!" He said "You know you have 4 years of college with the GI Bill that is coming." I said, "Oh!" He said, "You must sign up now." I said, "Okay. I'll sign up for it. So I did and that got me a ...

G: And where did you go to college?

J: I started at Bradley University in Peoria for 2 years; the last 4 years after that, the University of Oregon.

G: Must have been beautiful there.

J Yes, it was.

G: Your main work was as an ...

J: Architect.

G: Can you tell us a little bit about that?

J: Well, after graduation in 1952, I came back to Rockford. I got my license to practice. After 25 years, I had my own office in Beloit, Wisconsin. The last few years I worked for other firms ___?___.

G: Is there anything else you would like to tell us before we end the interview? When you got home did you find the family life changed by the shortages of the war? Was the car put up on blocks?

J: No. Dad still had the same car and drove it to work. It was the same old car. You couldn't buy a new car.

G: You couldn't get any new ones.

J: I think clothing was hard to get.

G: And shoes, too.

J: I suppose. I think I did get a job that first summer in a factory here as I was applying to the University. I bought a suit. Before I left San Juan, when I knew I was going home, I went to a very nice clothing store and it was a delightful dark brown brand new suit.

G: You were all ready.

J: I had to send it home from San Juan.

G: Your transition to civilian life was not difficult?

J: No, it was not difficult. It was very easy. I suppose because I hadn't really been in the bad areas and being almost in the heart of the city, it seemed like I hadn't been too far away.

G: Well, I want to thank you for taking the time to share these thoughts with us. We really appreciate this interview.