

## My Dad's War – by David Johnson

December 7<sup>th</sup> 1941 Albert E. Johnson and his brothers were called upon to defend their country, their honor, and their way of life. While attending their annual Fish and Game meeting in Sanford, Maine someone announced that the Japanese had attacked a naval base called Pearl Harbor. No one was quite sure of the location of this remote base, but everyone knew that the news was serious enough that the country would soon be embroiled in war. Albert, Richard (his fraternal twin brother) and Elwyn waited for the inevitable call up. Harry, the oldest brother, was exempted by his age, the number of his children, and the responsibility for the care of his household according to the policy of exemptions. On February 26, 1942 Albert took his DSS Form 2 to the Selective Service Registration Board at #3 York, Maine. There, Arthur A. Gould signed the form that would designate Albert E. Johnson 1-A, or fit for combat.

On August 10, 1942 order #10815 classified Albert E. Johnson, born November 05, 1920, son of Dana and Carrie Johnson, Alfred, Maine 1-A and fit to serve in the U.S. Army. By Monday, August 31, 1942, Albert was drafted and left for active military service and given the service number 31152209. He was sent on a smoky train ride from Portland, Maine to Fort Devens, Massachusetts, where he was outfitted with the customary U.S. Army khaki uniform and issued the orders that would lead him to Fort Bragg, North Carolina and eventually to Texas, artillery school, and Company C of the 771<sup>st</sup> Tank Destroyer Battalion.

Basic training began after a dusty and exhaustive train ride from Fort Devens to Fort Bragg in North Carolina. While engaged in 1942 basic training Albert became sick and spent two weeks in the infirmary. Nasopharyngitis was listed on his medical records.

While on sentry duty Albert stopped a Major from entering a barracks. He called "Halt" and when the Major didn't stop, Albert shoved the carbine into his chest. The Major, unruffled, complimented Albert's attention to duty.

After completion of basic training, including radio operations and Morse code, on December 13, 1942 Albert was sent to Camp Hood, Texas to become a radio operator in Company C of the 771<sup>st</sup> Tank Destroyer Battalion. On the Texas plains Albert spent hours learning to be a forward observer and becoming proficient at radio communications. The artillery was quickly being adapted to mobile conditions and Albert's job was to communicate from tank to tank and from tank to company headquarters. His low-level Morse code proficiency was being put to good use as each tank of the unit needed to coordinate with each other. Each soldier learned each other's job including the firing of the 105 howitzers. After battle tactics were practiced, another terrain was needed and found in the mountains and snows of Vermont. The thousand-mile journey was accomplished by railroad. Tanks were loaded onto flat cars and were guarded by GI's with carbines in the open turrets of the tanks. Naturally, many a GI was

covered by soot from the exhaust smoke of the steam driven train engines. Albert remembers seeing multiple engines far into the distance from his post at the center of the train. By January 27, 1943 the battalion was moved to Fort Ethan Allen, Burlington, Vermont. The train ride was long and included the tanks as well as the soldiers. Albert remembers sentry duty when the thermometer registered 30 degrees below zero. He made several stops at the barracks furnace to warm his hands. During his stay at Fort Ethan Allen the tracks on the tanks had to be changed as the conditions were unlike those in Texas. Instead of sand and the open plains the tanks were required to negotiate snow and hilly terrain. Albert found that changing the tracks on a tank is no easy task.

For five days from February 17 until February the 22<sup>nd</sup> Albert was home on leave in Alfred, Maine for a long awaited visit with his family.

By March, 1943 the 771<sup>st</sup> Tank Destroyer Battalion was shipped by rail from Fort Ethan Allen to A.P. Hill Reservation in Fredericksburg, Virginia. While on a weekend pass Albert and a buddy, Dennis Desmond spent some time in Richmond, Virginia. There, fun was to be had, but at a price, because upon the return to A.P. Hill the boys missed their stop at Fayetteville and ended up late to camp. The camp commander Captain Van Tassel did not take lightly to the infraction and each soldier lost a stripe and spent a good month assigned to Kitchen Patrol or K.P. as it was called in the Army. On Sunday May 9<sup>th</sup> Carrie Johnson received a call from her son and from July 1<sup>st</sup> until July 7<sup>th</sup>, 1943 Al took another leave in Alfred, Maine, which was again enjoyed by the whole Johnson family.

On Tuesday, September 6, 1943 Albert called home from Fort Dix, NJ; there to prepare for the embarkation to Europe. Albert took leave in Alfred from Tuesday, September 14 until September the 16<sup>th</sup>. In October the 771<sup>st</sup> Tank Destroyer Battalion left Fort Dix for Camp Shanks, New York and eventually boarded the Capetown Castle, a ship bound for England and the European Theater of war. The Capetown Castle was a British ship converted from peacetime purposes to a wartime transport. Soldiers were crowded into every corner of the ship. Pity the poor souls below decks. Albert was one of the lucky few to sleep on deck where one only needed to be alert to the British swabbies that would frequently wash the decks and if an unlucky soldier wasn't out of the way would be washed too. The trip across the Atlantic took thirteen days, and Albert learned a few survival skills, for example, don't eat the greasy, oily meals fed to the soldiers by the British navy, stick to jam, biscuits and tea. Many a helmet was tossed overboard by sickened soldiers using them for their relief. The Capetown was part of a much larger convoy which was zigzagging to avoid German submarines. One evening Albert heard a loud noise in the distance and saw light on the dark horizon. No one can be sure what he saw, but the image of a ship blown up by a German torpedo, and the men struggling valiantly to save themselves comes to mind. The Capetown Castle delivered the 771<sup>st</sup> safely to Liverpool, England and then on by train to Picton Park, Haverford West, Pembroke shire, West Wales about November, 1943.

By December, 1943 the Battalion could be found at Camp Barry, Wenvoe, Glamorganshire, and Wales. Europe would introduce Albert and some of the young American soldiers to a new language, a new culture and "haf and haf". The pubs provided a unique blend of half beer and half bitters to quench the thirst of the loneliest G.I. Here also the boys may have been introduced to the tradition of the short snort. The short snort was a practice of recording the drinking buddies of soldiers on a dollar bill and presenting it at the pub to avoid paying for the assembled group. Wales provided the opportunity to explore and visit a new country. Privates Wayne J. Walden and Albert E. Johnson went to Cardiff on a pass and innocently wandered on to Bute Road which happened to be, unbeknownst to them, a restricted area. The military police picked them up and deposited them into a jail in Cardiff, Wales. After a few hours in the British pokey the Commanding Officer of the 771<sup>st</sup> collected the boys and returned them to their camp. As a result of this misadventure the boys were dubbed the "Bute Road Kings". In preparation for combat the company was called upon to practice shooting their 76 mm cannon against a moving target. The British navy provided the moving target for company practice. The 771<sup>st</sup> lined up their tanks along a river bank and the British Navy towed targets up the river for the unit to fire upon. This the company did, firing their cannon and in the process, hitting the tow rope and releasing the King's target to float away, much to the chagrin of the British Navy.

From May until September, 1944 the unit was moved hobo-like from Camp Barry to Sounton, Devonshire, England and then Piddle Hinton, Dorchester, England. From September until October, 1944 the unit moved from the port of Portland Bill, England to Omaha Beach, Normandy to Fontainebleau, Seine and Marne, France.

November 5, 1944, having just turned 24 years old, radioman Albert Johnson entered combat in the Huertgen Forrest region of Belgium with the 9<sup>th</sup> army, 102<sup>nd</sup> infantry division. The unit was lined up for twelve days providing artillery support for the battle for the Huertgen forest. Tank crew member and gunner Corporeal Samuelson was wounded by a German sniper while relieving himself. While on guard duty at night PFC Johnson heard a movement beyond his station; he fired his 30mm machine gun and no longer heard any noise. He didn't look for anything in the morning as he and the crew needed to leave promptly. The company was under German artillery fire from time to time. Corporal Stanley Bernstein replaced Samuelson as gunner with Sgt Klein's crew. By November 17<sup>th</sup>, Sgt Klein and his crew are sent to Heerlen, Holland to affect repairs on their tank and prepare for the advance on Germany. They were billeted in a farm house with a very receptive family, including several daughters, one of whom was smitten by the young PFC Albert Johnson. She was sixteen and clearly had a crush on Albert.

November 19, 1944 PFC Johnson and Pvt Wayne J. Walden left the assembly area and farm house in Heerlen, Holland by truck for Immendorf, Germany where the company was preparing to defend itself against expected German counter attacks. The tanks were lined up and about forty feet apart awaiting orders to advance on the enemy. Albert's tank included five crew members: T 5 Pachula, the driver, Sgt Klein, the tank commander, Pvt Walden, the loader, Cpl Sidney Bernstein, turret gunner, and PFC Johnson, radio operator.

On November 20, 1944 Sgt Klein ordered his tank forward when two advancing German tanks were spotted. With quick and accurate firing of Klein's 76mm gun the two German panther tanks were disabled. Klein's tank ran out of armor piercing ammunition when a third German tank approached and fired upon Klein's tank. Albert radioed desperately for ammunition to replenish the shrinking supply. Sgt Klein refused to leave the battlefield and rearm and Pvt Walden resorted to firing high explosive shells, which are useless against the German tanks. The third German Panther fired three shells at Klein's tank. The first shell hit the dirt harmlessly. The second shell hit the side of Klein's tank, and the third shell exploded in the turret area beheading Cpl. Sidney Bernstein and wounding much of the crew including Albert and Wayne who were soon moved to a Belgium Hospital. Albert spent several months recovering from wounds and shock. While in the hospital Albert was visited by a hometown acquaintance Dr. Carl Richards of his home state of Maine. Three of the crew members were awarded the Silver Star for their bravery and all received the Purple Heart. Carrie Johnson received a telegram on December 4, 1944 that Albert Johnson was slightly wounded on November 20<sup>th</sup>, 1944.

Albert was sent back to England aboard a C-47 with fifteen other soldiers where he spent six weeks in the hospital recuperating from his injuries. Eventually he was assigned to the headquarters of the Ninth Air Force as a radio operator with the 40<sup>th</sup> Mobile Communication Squadron. February 13, 1945 Albert returns to France with the 40<sup>th</sup> Communication Squadron. He is stationed in a French town

Called Fontainebleau, which is about 20 miles from Paris, France. The unit celebrates VE Day on May 8<sup>th</sup> in Fontainebleau, France and was then moved to Bad Kissengen, Germany. The 40<sup>th</sup> Communication Squadron was responsible for the power and operation of communications including weather updates to pilots in flight to combat areas. Soldiers were housed in barracks once used by the German Army. 75 operators including Albert were selected to ship out to England. They flew from Bad Kissengen, Germany to England in another C-47. While in England Albert resumes his education in radio technology for six weeks. He was assigned to the 361<sup>st</sup> Airdrome Squadron. This unit was scheduled to be shipped directly to the South Pacific. All their equipment had been shipped and the men were getting malarial shots for the CBI (China, Burma, and India) theater of war. VJ day came and the operation was called off. The 361<sup>st</sup> was broken up and Al was transferred to the 37<sup>th</sup> Station Camp where everyone with 60 to 80 points was located. Al had 75 points. Points were given based on days in

combat, time in uniform and other factors to determine when soldiers would be released from service. While awaiting transportation back to the states the men were assigned to an ordinance company. The men were assigned the task of defusing 500 lbs fragmentation bombs. One of which was dropped. You could cut the silence with a knife.

Finally, Albert was reassigned to the 984<sup>th</sup> Military Police so that he could be sent back to the United States. He sailed home on the aircraft carrier "USS Enterprise". The trip took six days.

Albert returns to Alfred on December 5, 1945 with his honorable discharge and his ruptured duck, a pin that signified to the military police that a returning veteran from World War 2 was in transit and was eligible to wear his uniform for thirty days after his honorable discharge.

Albert knew that he and his comrades had completed a job well done. He returned home with the single goal to put the war behind him and begin a life of opportunity and freedom that he had helped preserve.