

Washburn During The War Years

1939-1945 —

The Boys At War — 11

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Following are excerpts from the second part of a letter written in July 1942 by Donald Johnson to his uncle in Washburn, Robert Johnson, describing his training to become a paratrooper. "The fourth week we jumped from the plane. It was too windy the first day so we went up for a plane ride. One of the boys quit then and would not stick around for the jump the following day. It was not so windy the next day so we jumped. Twenty-four men went up in a plane. For the first jump we jumped in 3-men style. For the second and third jumps we jumped in 6-man mass formation. And for the fourth and fifth jumps, we jumped in 12-man mass formation. That was an awful feeling when we stepped into the plane. It was a worse feeling after we got in the air and knew we wouldn't come down in it. When we neared the field the jumpmaster said 'Stand up!' We all stood up. We stood that way for 15 seconds and then he gave us the signal to 'hook-up'.



Lars Larson
Guest Columnist

About 100 feet from the ground we pull down on the riser straps with short, choppy strokes to check any oscillation that the chute might have. About 80 feet from the ground we check to see that our feet are the width of our hips apart, that our knees are slightly bent, and that our toes are pointed slightly down. About 10 feet from the ground we pull down as hard as we can on the riser straps so that we will not hit the ground too hard. That ground comes up at a terrific rate of speed. It comes up at funny angles sometimes, too. You see,

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That meant that we had to snap our static line to the cable that runs from one end of the plane to the other. The static line is fastened to the back of the parachute pack and jerks the cover off when we fall from the plane and pulls out the chute. The next signal was to 'stand at door.' The first man stands at the door with his face sticking out and his hands braced to the sides of the door and his feet in running position. The jumpmaster slaps the man on the leg and yells, 'Go!' The first man jumps and then all the other men jump almost on top of each other. Twelve men jump inside ten seconds. You cannot hesitate a fraction of a second up there. If you do, some man is liable to land in a river or the trees.

After you leave the plane and are falling, it is just like being in a dream. (Did you ever have a nightmare?) Anyway, there is no sensation at all. You don't get that funny feeling in the stomach; it feels just as if you were floating. After you fall 50 to 75 feet you get an awful jolt. It feels as though someone hit you in the back of the neck with a baseball bat? only there is no pain. You bounce up there like a rubber ball in the ocean. You get an awful shaking up when that chute opens but it certainly is a wonderful feeling to look up and see that white silk.

COL 2

we usually come down in a slight pendulum swing or in a drift. If you hit the ground when you are swinging sideways or coming in backwards, it is easy to get hurt. When you are making your descent you are falling at the rate of 14-20 feet per second. So you see you just don't just 'float' to the ground? you hit and hit hard!

After five jumps we are qualified parachutists. We get a certificate and a pair of silver wings. After qualifying I went to Demolition School, where I learned a little about TNT and dynamite. I learned how to drive a truck, motorcycle, an armored car, tank and a locomotive. I now have seven jumps to my credit.

About a week ago we were transferred to the Alabama Training Area, about 25 miles from Fort Benning. We will undergo an eight week's training program. When that is completed we will probably be making that boat trip. I am not so keen on that. One of our regiments is all set to leave and we will probably be the next to go. There probably is something in the wind. Maybe you would like to know about the pay we are getting. I am a private first class, which pays \$56, and adding my bonus gives me \$106 per month."

Donald Johnson died of wounds on January 11 1945 in Luxemburg.