

Washburn During The War Years — The Boys At War

128

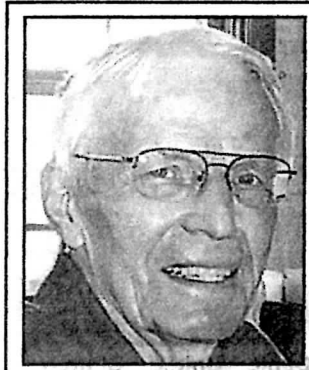
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Donald Johnson, son of Mr. and Mrs. Godfrey Johnson and grandson of Mrs. Charles Johnson of Washburn, lived in Washburn as a boy. He enlisted in the Army in 1941 and was trained as a paratrooper. As a member of the famed 101st Airborne Division, he participated in the invasion of Normandy in June 1944 and Southern France in August 1944.

Following is the first part of a letter he wrote to his uncle, Robert Johnson, of Washburn, describing his training to become a paratrooper.

"Parachute jumping isn't so bad—it only scares you to death every time you jump! I suppose you would like to know whatever possessed me to join this outfit. I was a corporal and stenographer to General Wood at Camp Livingstone, Louisiana. There wasn't much to do and I was sick of the inactivity. I happened to see an order to the effect that they were in need of parachutists and immediately submitted my request for transfer.

I was transferred here last February 7th. After I arrived here I had to wait two weeks before the next class started. In the meantime we underwent calisthenics and ran five miles daily—to get us in condition for the training. After doing



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steno work for about ten years it just about killed me, but I got through.

The first week of our regular four months training period was tough. I never knew there were so many different kinds of calisthenics. We did them all. We also double-timed for miles at a time. We had to climb a 30 foot rope, tumble from six-foot platforms, work on the spar bars, do things on a trampoline canvas that only a cat was born to do. We practiced jumping from a dummy plane until everything was mechanical. We were hoisted up in a parachute harness and had to do different maneuvers by pulling certain straps. That was tough and very exhausting.

All the foregoing took place in the mornings. Afternoons were spent

learning all about chutes—construction, different parts, packing, etc. We did that the first two weeks. The third week was spent on the towers. They had two 250-foot towers. When I saw them I felt like quitting. The first thing they did was to hoist us two at a time in a seat to the top. At the top they let us look around a while to get used to the height. I couldn't see anything with my eyes closed. Talk about a sensation when we were released. We dropped to the bottom and our fall was stopped by springs.

Next they strapped us in a harness and hoisted us standing up. When I was about 25 feet from the ground I thought surely that must be the top. When I was 50 feet from the ground I thought I was above the tower and that some freak air current was blowing me around the country. Just before I came to the 250 foot level I was all set to scream. They let us dangle up there mercilessly before they released the chute. It was a regular parachute and the descent was controlled by wires running to the top through the canopy. We dropped at the same rate as a regular jump.

The purpose of this was to give us practice in holding our legs the width of our hips apart, bending our

knees slightly and pointing the toes at a slight angle to the ground. That is done so the hips absorb most of the shock and there is not so much danger of breaking an arm or a leg. Next they strapped us in a harness and raised us 150 feet while in a prone position with our stomach and face pointing towards the ground. At a given signal, we ripped the rip cord, counted 1000, 2000, 3000, and changed the rip cord from the right hand to the left. We fell 15 feet and received a terrific jolt. This was done to accustom us to the shock-opening of a chute.

Next we went on the 'free' towers. They hoisted us to the top in a regular chute and released us. We then floated to the ground just like in a regular jump. We had to practice maneuvering our chutes to go in different directions. This was kind of tough to do because we would hit the ground too soon. There were about 10 broken legs as a result of jumping from the towers.

Out of an original class of 400 and some men, 239 of us graduated. Some of the boys quit, some were dismissed, and some were forced out by injuries."