

This interview is being conducted on Thursday, July 26, 2018, at the home of Oscar E. Johnson in Lockport, Illinois. My name is Fran Prokop and I am speaking with Mr. Johnson who served in the United States Army and is a veteran of World War II. Mr. Johnson learned of the Veterans History Project through Evangeline Stephenson of the Lockport Public Library. He has kindly consented to participate in the National Archives Veterans History Project. Here is his story:

Mr. Johnson, when and where were you born?

Lockport, Illinois, 1925, October 28, 1925.

What were your parents' occupations at the time?

My Mother was a -- worked at Montgomery Wards. My Dad at that time was a molder.

How many brothers and sisters did you have?

I had three sisters and no brother.

What did you do before entering the service?

I worked at a gas station.

How old were you?

18.

Did you ever finish high school before you went to the service. –

I got a diploma – where is it.

Mr. Johnson has his diploma now, which he received afterwards. How far in high school did you go before entering the service.

Two hours – ha, ha, I mean two years.

Mr. Johnson is slightly hard of hearing so I'm going to talk slowly and loudly so he can understand me. Did any other family members serve in the military – your father –

No, no, I was the only son.

How did you enter the service were you drafted or did you enlist?

I was drafted.

So you were drafted at age 18.

18.

How did you get to the training camp – was there an office in Lockport?

I went into the service from Niles, Michigan.

Oh, you lived there –

My step Dad had a job over in South Bend and we were living in Niles, Michigan at the time.

So you went in from Michigan.

Michigan.

How did you get to your training camp – by train, by bus?

Yeah, we went by bus, yeah.

Where did you go for boot camp – for basic training?

Basic training was at – I can't think –

Lynda Caneva is Oscar's daughter to assist us; Charles Johnson, his son, is also here and they both will assist in answering some questions.

Fort Sheridan.

Okay, so you went to Fort Sheridan in Illinois.

Company B.

Do you remember your basic training.

Here it is right here.

No, That's not your basic training; when you first went in –

Yeah, okay, I was in the – Leonard Wood.

Oh, Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri – is where you ended up?

Basic training.

Okay, Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, basic. What did they do there? Tell me about basic training.

Well, we had all the -- what would you say –

Charles: You learned to shoot; you learned to march, right? You learned to be a soldier.

How long were you there at Fort Leonard Wood?

Not too long, we were there probably about three months.

Did you get any specialized training at all?

No, just regular.

How about classroom teaching – were you in a classroom too?

No, we just had to get on the ground, you know, Army, basic – rifle and –

You went in right after Christmas; your DD214 says 12-21-43 – you entered –

Yeah.

So you were there through March. How did you yourself adapt to military life – the physical regimen, the barracks, the food and the men. How did you feel?

I felt that we were taken good care of, but with all the stuff – you know –

And how was the food?

Food was all right. I always liked the food.

So you really had no problems adjusting, getting along, following orders and things like that?

No, no.

After basic training, where did you go?

Went to Fort Bragg, New Jersey.

Fort Bragg is in North Carolina – why did you go there?

Charles: That's where they shipped you out.

Oh, it was like a shipping station? Is that where you left – from Fort Bragg?

We went to New Jersey and then out of New Jersey we went to England.

Did you go by ship? A troop ship?

A troop ship, yeah.

How was the crossing? How did you fare?

Oh, I was all right.

You didn't get seasick?

No, I didn't get sick.

Other people did?

I don't know.

How long did it take you to get across the ocean?

I don't know; I think it took about three days to get over there.

Oh, probably more than that.

Three days.

A week probably, at least.

I don't know.

So it was – the point is –

We went to England first –

Do you remember where in England you landed?

I don't know; it was a camp there, I know that.

What did you do there? What happened in England?

Basic training –

More basic training?

Basic training there and then we got shipped over to France.

Oh. France.

And then we went into combat from there.

So can you tell me about combat? Can you tell me what action you witnessed.

I was a Scout – number one Scout.

So were you a good rifleman – a good shooter – to be a Scout?

Well, I guess they kept me.

So those were your duties – and what was your grade; what rank were you?

I was a private; private First Class – PFC.

Tell me how you did your job. What did you do exactly?

I was – I was –

What did you do as a Scout?

Lynda – when you were a Scout what did you do?

What did I do when I was a Scout? I scouted.

Describe it; describe how you scouted.

Lynda: What did you have to do there?

I'd go out in front of the thing -- and go out; you're the first one to go out.

How did you feel about that? What were your emotions?

I felt all right. I didn't appreciate being over there but I had a good time.

Did you witness any casualties?

Oh, yeah, during the war there was – yeah. Not mine – I never had anything.

You never were injured or shot at or anything? I mean, you were shot at –

I was never hit – put it that way.

Charles: You learned to duck.

Lynda: Tell her about the guy that got shot through his helmet.

Oh, yeah, one of the guys was shot by a bullet through his helmet, right on the side of his head. I can't remember what his name was.

Was he saved by the helmet or did that kill him?

Yeah, he lived; No he never got hurt; just the steel helmet.

How long were you there as a scout?

I was there till I got shipped home –.

Was it two years, one year?

Till the war was over.

So you were there from 1944 till the war was over, two years?

Yeah.

Mr. Johnson left the Army March 1, 1946 – so during those two years did you stay in France all that time?

We were in France, France.

Lynda: And you went to Belgium.

France and Belgium.

Well, in Belgium, yeah. But then we went to France.

Charles: Battle of the Bulge.

Mr. Johnson took part in several different campaigns, which I don't think that he recalls fully – but he does have a lot of papers here. He was in B Company of the 289th Infantry, correct?

Right on.

I am reading from papers that he has here – he was in the 75th Infantry Division, that took part in the Battle in the Ardennes, which was December 23, 1944 to January 27, 1945; he was also in the Kolmar Pocket Battle – January 30, 1945 to February 9, 1945; and also the Battle for the Ruhr, March 31, 1945 to April 15, 1945. Mr. Johnson was in all of those campaigns and he has several pages of information – roster of names of comrades who served with him in those battles. He has quite an extensive history about what happened in those battles, plus, pictures drawn and maps of each of the battles.

Can you tell me different incidents that happened during some of these battles?

I don't know – that's so long ago.

I know, but that's what we're talking about.

I put that out of my head when I got out of the Army; that's it; honest.

You can't think of any individual actions that took place, that either involved you or your friends?

Well, there was two or three of them that got killed in front of me, you know –

That's what I'm talking about. What happened? Tell me – how did they get killed?

Well, one of them got killed by a tank; he was shot by a tank and somebody else was – what else – I can't think.

What was the highest rank you ever achieved?

Private – PFC. I never got any higher than private. Private First Class is what they call it.

How did you stay in touch with your family when you were over there in war –

Did you write letters?

Well, yeah, we'd write letters; when we were – at times of rest, we'd write home; write letters to the home. I got it back from my mother; and she was the only one that sent me anything; my sister sent Christmas stuff too.

When you got those letters, and you saw the postmark date on them, how long did those letters take to get to you?

I never made – probably a couple of days, 3 or 4 days.

I'm sure it was more than that probably a couple of weeks.

Well, maybe, I don't know. I don't remember even taking that when my ma wrote it. I don't remember that even.

When you were not actively in the war, did you do anything recreational? Were you able to go into towns or anything, or were you just strictly in combat?

If we were at a place where it was – we were off duty, we could go into the town, you know, that was after the war though.

So while you were in the service there was no time for anything else but –

No, no, not while – during the war. After the war then we had time to go places.

Did you ever stay in touch with buddies that you met during the war?

No.

Charles: Yes you did – Jessie James.

Lynda: Yes, you had friends – Jessie James and the guys you met in Iowa; used to go and meet them there.

Were there like reunions that he attended afterwards?

Lynda: Well, not reunions; they just got together.

Charles: We went out to Jessie James –

You mean out in Iowa?

Lynda: Yes, when you went to Iowa – you and Mom went to Iowa and met your friends out there.

Oh, Yeah.

After the war – you remember that.

That was after we got home. After the war and I come home, I had a buddy down in – where was it – Ohio – one was in Ohio and one was in Iowa and one was in Oklahoma.

Where were you when the war ended? In August of 1945?

I was in Germany.

Oh, you didn't mention Germany. Do you remember the day that you heard the war had ended?

Oh, yeah.

What did you do – how did the guys –

We celebrated.

How did they celebrate?

Beer, ha, ha, lots of beer – Germany was the place.

The war ended in August of '45 but you were still in until March '46.

Yeah, we pulled some kind of ground duty.

What did that involve? What did you have to do? What was ground duty?

I don't know; I can't remember everything.

How did you return home – did you come back by ship again?

From England?

Well, from wherever you were,

From England we came back on a boat to New York.

And how did you get home from New York? By train, by bus?

Oh, yeah, uh, well, I got a plane to Chicago and –

How did you get to Michigan – drive?

I was living in Lockport; my parents were in Lockport.

How was your reception by family and friends?

Very good; very good. They were all glad to see me.

How was your readjustment to civilian life?

I did all right.

You didn't have a job before you were in high school –

No, I went to work right away.

Where did you go to work?

Gas station.

Did you ever use the G.I. Bill, for going to school?

No, I didn't go to school; I went to work. I went to work; found my wife and got married.

Lynda: didn't you work in the steel mill for awhile?

Yes, I worked at the steel mill, U.S. Steel in Joliet.

Did you retire from there?

No, no. I retired from the gas station.

Lynda: And he worked at the post office.

So, other than the two or three men you mentioned, you didn't have any other contact with veterans. Do you belong to any veterans organizations today?

No.

It's too bad that he can't remember more in talking about the battles. You don't remember anything more about the battles you were in? That's what I'm here for, to hear about that.

I don't know – about battles –

The battles that are mentioned here that you were involved in.

Everything's in them things (indicating the booklets he has).

But I want your story from it; not just what's written in these papers.

That's all.

Lynda: What did you do when it was so cold. You told me you had to put your socks in your pants; you put your socks in your pants to keep them warm – to dry.

Yeah.

Lynda: Because why? Because all the guys were getting trench foot; yeah, a lot of guys were getting trench foot, you told me.

Trench foot, yeah. I forgot what – what they called it – trench foot. Yeah, I never got it but – yeah the socks

Lynda: But you dried your socks inside your uniform.

Inside the uniform, okay. How about digging foxholes and stuff like that; did you have to dig foxholes?

Oh, sure, ha, ha, oh yeah; that was during the war, yes.

Well, if you don't remember anything more – how did your wartime experience affect your life?

I went into the service; I did what I thought I had to do and I didn't try to do anything extra.

In other words, how would you say it, kiss the sergeant, I don't know –

You did your job.

Lynda: You did your job.

Kiss his ass –

You did your job – ha, ha.

I think that's why I was a scout. Put me out in front – boom, boom

So what life lessons have you learned from being in the military, in general

Lynda: What did you learn from being in the Army? Did you learn something from being in the Army?

Yeah, never do it again. Right?

Charles: I agree; I'm with you on that one.

Okay.

I did what I had to do and that was it.

You did your job.

I didn't care much for the Army –

War is hell – okay, so if anything comes to mind that you would like to include, just let your daughter know – if you remember something, I can include it.

Who does this go to?

This goes to the Library of Congress (showing field kit). It will be on the computer where your children and grandchildren can read this.

Oh, yeah?

Yeah.

Well that's nice, isn't it?

Yeah, and your voice will be on the tape; that will go too. Thank you very much for this interview and thank you for your service to our country.

Okay, okay.

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