

**Corporal Robert H. Johnson**  
**Army Air Force**  
**World War II Experience**  
by  
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## **Preface**

The information in the following biography was compiled from an interview with Robert H. Johnson.

Fifty years ago the Saint Louis Cardinals won the World Series, Bing Crosby won an Academy Award for best actor, and the Allies invaded Normandy. This is a biography of one of those men who made the Allies' victory possible, Corporal Robert H. Johnson.

Robert Johnson was born on December 11, 1923 in Marquette, Michigan to Rose and Fred Johnson. He grew up in a house on Rock Street on the south side of Marquette. He started caddying at the Marquette Country Club when he was eight years old. It was there that he developed his everlasting passion for golf.

Robert graduated from both Baraga Grade School and Baraga High School. When he graduated, he went to work on the railroad. It was then he met his wife Catherine. Robert's brother was seeing Catherine's sister and each decided to take the other along on one of their dates, and as the cliché says, "The rest is history."

Robert remembers when he heard about the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. He recalls he was at home with his parents on Sunday morning when the news came over the radio. The whole family was shocked. They really never thought the United States would get involved. Robert remembers not even knowing where Pearl Harbor was. "Everything just seemed so far away, and we didn't know the world like you guys do today."

As the war progressed Robert continued to work on the railroad until one day a notice came in the mail on

March 12, 1943. It stated that Robert Johnson was drafted by the United States Army and he was to report to his local draft board.

Robert's parents were proud and worried but knew it was his patriotic duty. He was glad he was going because people were sort of looked down upon if they didn't serve.

Robert received basic training in Atlantic City, New Jersey. It was there he made close associations with the rest of his squad.

After his indoctrination he was transferred to Camp Ripply, Minnesota, then Fort Custer, Michigan and finally Camp Barkly, Texas. Robert mostly trained other new soldiers on how to operate and clean firearms because he already had experience with firearms having grown up deer hunting . He was fully knowledgeable about the M-1 rifle, the Thompson machine gun, and the 30 caliber machine gun. He recalls making the trainees take apart and reassemble their rifles with a blind fold on within sixty seconds.

One of Robert's fondest memories was in Minnesota when he had to communicate with Mexicans and Chinese who could not speak English. He recalls having to get to know each of them in order to communicate effectively.

From Camp Barkely, Texas, Robert was shipped to the debarkation point in New York City for the voyage to Europe on February 27, 1944. He was on his way to the war zone a little less than a year after he had been drafted. He was now a part of the Army Air Force and was designated as a military police officer and the platoon photographer.

He would travel with his squad and take pictures for the making of identification cards.

Robert and his squad arrived in the European Theater of Operations at Maiden Head, England, eleven days after debarkation. He was stationed twenty miles south of London and was further trained on how to guard air bases.

Robert was sent to the beaches of Normandy seven days after D-Day. It was there that he started his way, with his squad, across France, guarding air bases along the way. He was a part of an aviation engineering battalion. The Army Air Force would clear a site for a new airfield and the engineers would lay a metal runway strip. The runway was comprised of many squares of metal that had teeth and fit together like a big long jigsaw puzzle. It was his squad's job to secure the

area during this construction and protect it afterwards until the battalion moved on.

Robert had minimal combat exposure but was shelled heavily a few times. Most of the time he was at least twenty miles behind the front lines. He recalls one particularly heavy shelling experience that occurred right after he arrived in France. They noticed German surveillance planes that were flying overhead and a few days later the bombing started. They were well dug in and no one was injured but it was a scary feeling. The dirt was falling down around them with every shake from a shell. Robert says they were using "Butterfly bombs." These were large bombs that opened up above the target and scattered many smaller, grenade-like bombs. They were extremely thorough and covered everything.

Robert recalls seeing his brother a few times while in France. This was nice even though he really never got homesick. He recalled that everyone around was American that he never had that lonely feeling from missing home. Robert said that seeing his brother just made each of them relax knowing they were both still healthy.

As his squad moved across France they stopped in an area six miles outside of Paris named Buque. Here they guarded the 9th Air Force headquarters. Robert lived

with a bunch of other guys in a chateau. I saw a picture of this chateau and it looked extremely quaint and pleasant. He recalls this time as being the most enjoyable as they spent time fraternizing and drinking French wines and beer.

Next they moved into Germany on the south side of the Rhine River. Robert remembers this area as very beautiful country. They did absolutely nothing for three weeks. He remembers deer hunting and going to the German bars. The people were unpredictable and they had to be on their toes. Sometimes they would go to a bar and the owner would ignore them until someone simply set a .45 caliber pistol on the bar and then the service was great.

Robert had a feeling that they were there just in case they were needed, but they never encountered "the enemy."

Another experience while in France was when the U.S.O. came and brought Dinah Shore to sing to the boys. This was a nice surprise and really cheered up a lot of the soldiers that were homesick.

Robert was sad when Franklin D. Roosevelt died because he was a good president. On the other hand, he also liked Harry Truman and felt he was an excellent president as well.

As the war ended in Europe, Robert was headed for Japan to finish the war. They were actually packed up and on a boat headed for the Pacific when the news broke out that the war was over and the United States dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

He wasn't quite sure what the atomic bomb was and had a hard time believing the magnitude of such a bomb.

When the news came over the radio about the war being over, the ship turned around and headed for New York. They couldn't celebrate much because they were on a ship, but they did a lot of talking with each other about what they would do when they got home. A lot of Robert's things were lost because of this. They had packed much of their possessions to be shipped on a different boat to meet them in the Pacific. A lot of war memorabilia and cameras never made it to New York.

After his arrival back in the states, Robert was put on leave to Camp Grant in Illinois from September 12th to November 10th. He was then discharged on November 10, 1945. He was asked if he wanted to join the active reserves but turned this down and became an inactive reserve.

When Robert returned home, things were pretty much back to normal. His parents and girlfriend were elated



and many of his friends were already back or returning everyday. It was then that Robert married his wife Catherine. He also did a lot of catching up with old friends at social functions around town.

Robert didn't return to the railroad but took a job with Michigan Bell. He worked for them for thirty-nine and a half years before retiring.

Robert Johnson's contribution to the war effort is an excellent example of what many soldiers did to make the United States a victorious nation during the time of World War II.