

THERE AREN'T MANY OF US LEFT ANYMORE

ONCE STOICALLY SILENT, PALO ALTO WORLD WAR 2 VETERAN OPENS UP ABOUT THE NORMANDY INVASION AND OTHER WW2 BATTLES

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A portrait of World War II veteran Wilton Johnson, 97, at his home in Palo Alto, Calif., on Wednesday, May 5, 2021

The Mercury News
UPDATED JUNE 6, 2021

Wilton Johnson, a corporal with the 82nd Airborne Division, jumped on D-Day and reached Germany before the war's end.

While King George VI visited victorious Allied troops in Normandy 10 days after they drove the Nazis off French beaches, Wilton Johnson of Menlo Park marched north on the peninsula toward his next mission past tall hedgerows on war-torn roads with the faint *rat-tat* of gunfire in the distance.

As part of a machine gun platoon for the 82nd Airborne Division, Johnson, and his men — just hours after landing in France during the historic Normandy Invasion — attacked a roadblock set up near the German-occupied town of Sainte-Mère-Église.

They took the town and Johnson was photographed in front of the town's church. Then more danger lurked, as he and his squad walked in drainage ditches next to a road amid the thuds of artillery in the distance.

Suddenly there was a flash of light and everything went dark. A mortar shell tore through his friend Herman Young of Texas, killing him, and leaving Johnson with a gaping wound in his back.

"It just happened, like that," Johnson, now 97 and one of the few remaining World War II veterans in the Bay Area, said in a recent interview at his Palo Alto home. "Fortunately, someone, one of the members of my squad, stuffed a piece of cloth or something in my back to stop the bleeding. If it wasn't for that, I would've died."

"That was all of Normandy for me," he said.

Like many people of his time, Johnson has never told the story of his war days. "It's something you'd rather forget," he said with a distant look in his eyes. But with memories from the war fading, Johnson felt the urge to tell his story ahead of Memorial Day.

"There aren't many of us left," he explained. "It's time."

Johnson recalled jumping out of an airplane with more than 13,000 other paratroopers right after midnight on June 6, 1944, taking part in the enormous invasion that turned the tide of the European Theater and has been mythologized in American film, video games, and popular culture since.

The jump on D-Day wasn't his first and the wounds he suffered in France wouldn't be his last.

He was just 18 when he felt compelled by patriotic pressure to enlist and fight in the war. At the time, he was living with his parents — Dust Bowl refugees from North Dakota — and working for Southern Pacific Lines in San Francisco while also helping out at a gas station in Menlo Park when he could. Then one day in April 1942, Wilton took a train to an office building in downtown San Francisco and signed up. "I thought about enlisting after Pearl Harbor, but I wasn't old enough," Johnson said. "When I turned 18, I just felt it was my duty to serve. I wasn't nervous or anything. I was determined to do it. I had accepted it was what I had to do."

At first, he operated a watchtower over Menlo Park at a time when California feared a Japanese attack. But before he knew it, Johnson was headed to Monterey and later San Miguel for basic training at Camp Roberts.

After months of training and doing five qualifying jumps out of a Douglas C-47, Johnson went overseas to Casablanca, though he didn't see any fighting. But when Allied troops readied for an assault on mainland Europe in July 1943, Johnson found himself in an olive orchard outside Tunisia preparing to jump into Sicily.

Those jumps were nothing compared to the one in Normandy.

Having staved off serious war injuries until then, Johnson wasn't expecting the months-long, harrowing recovery he'd go through after that mortar shell punched a hole into his back. He received his first Purple Heart medal in England and a Bronze Star a couple of weeks after fighting deep inside enemy territory in Normandy.

On the Ruhr river near the town of Schmidt, Germany, he was wounded again. It was an injury he couldn't bring himself to talk about, and by the time he recovered, the war was winding down and Johnson was sent home.

There, Johnson started working at the old gas station again before joining the fire department. Transitioning from the battlefields to buying groceries in Menlo Park after 1945 "was a little difficult," Johnson said.

"I guess I still had itchy feet," he said.



PALO ALTO – MAY 5: World War II veteran Wilton Johnson, 97, holds his old uniform up at his home in Palo Alto, Calif., on Wednesday, May 5, 2021. (Bay Area News Group)

Johnson went through multiple jobs — including as a mortician at one point and a merchant marine sailor at another — until finally settling down as a U.S. Post Office mailman for 27 years. He married his

wife, Clara Johnson, after the war and had three daughters, Sharon Webster, Hannah Limon, and Judith Johnson, and bought a home in Palo Alto where he's lived since.

Webster, Johnson's eldest daughter, said in an interview that her father never talked about the war to any of his children. Describing him as a quiet, reserved father, Webster said Johnson "was there, but he wasn't there."

Johnson would come home, read the mail, pay the bills, watch the news, and eat dinner, always asking about how everyone's day went but never talking about how his went.

Webster suspects her dad has pent-up emotions he's never dealt with, and skeletons in closets they'll never know about. As the wife of a Vietnam War veteran, Webster said she can tell her father "definitely" showed signs of post-traumatic stress.



PALO ALTO – MAY 5: World War II veteran Wilton Johnson, 97, puts on his cap from his uniform at his home in Palo Alto, Calif., on Wednesday, May 5, 2021. (Randy Vazquez/ Bay Area News Group)

"But he covered it well," Webster said. "Very well. My dad would've been a different person if he'd talked about it. I don't think World War II veterans got the counseling they needed."

It was only after she'd grown older and went with Johnson to the 50th anniversary of the invasion of Normandy in 1994 that she truly got to know her dad. Touring different cemeteries across northern France, Webster watched as Johnson — stoically silent and somber — suddenly teared up remembering the people he lost.

"It was something that I'll never forget," Webster said. "It just opened my eyes to what my dad went through. We loved and respected him very much, but none of us really knew him. That's the first time he opened up, and it was the first time I got to know him as not my dad but as a person."

"I didn't know my dad was a hero," Webster added. "He was just Dad."

Jerome Strom, a Korean War veteran and close friend of Johnson for 50 years, told him candidly during a joint interview, "I know you don't talk about it much, but I've always admired you." Whenever they talked, it was mostly business.

Asked why veterans like him don't talk about the war, Johnson said, "Some of them, like me, have had experiences they would just as soon forget. ... I haven't talked much about it with anyone before. We had an organization (of veterans), but it has dwindled and is probably depleted now. Time does that."