

ORAL HISTORY
THOMAS JOHNSON
U. S. ARMY, U. S. NAVY
USS RABY

This is Cork Morris. Today is October 19, 2002, and I'm interviewing Mr. Johnson who was in the army and the navy and this interview is taking place at the Nimitz Museum in Fredericksburg, Texas, in support of the Center for the Pacific War studies and archives for the National Museum of the Pacific War. I'd like to start with you telling us where you were born, when you were born, and who your parents were.

MR. JOHNSON: I was born in Dallas, Texas. Thomas and Ruth Johnson were my parents.

MR. MORRIS: And when was this?

MR. JOHNSON: April 9, 1918.

MR. MORRIS: Did you go to high school or college?

MR. JOHNSON: Not in Texas. I moved around a number of times, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and then moved back to Kirkwood where I live now. All of my schooling was either in Youngstown, Ohio, or Pittsburg or St. Louis. I had two years of college.

MR. MORRIS: Where did you go to college?

MR. JOHNSON: Washington University in St. Louis.

MR. MORRIS: Were you in college when the war broke out?

MR. JOHNSON: Yes.

MR. MORRIS: Were you drafted or how did you get into the service?

MR. JOHNSON: The first time I was drafted into the army and that was before the war started. The draft started before the war started and I served in the army for about nine months. Then my mother went to the Red Cross and asked that I be discharged because there was no war on and because it was a hardship case. She and my grandfather thought they'd turn me loose, give me an honorable discharge. In fact, they sent me a letter that they had no further use for my services. Then the war hit. A friend of mine was enlisting in the navy air corps and he talked me into joining him. So I went down and joined the navy air corps. Then I get a notice from the draft board that I'm to report to the barracks back in the army. I showed them my navy enlistment, so that was cancelled. I went to a number of training schools in the air corps. I went

to Murray, Kentucky, Iowa City at Timolaya? and I had some flight training, flew for forty hours, and then I washed out of the program.

MR. MORRIS: What were they making you fly?

MR. JOHNSON: I started out in Taylor Craft and then I was flying what was called the Yellow Peril

or Stearman, and that's when I washed out. I scared the instructor. Then I went to Great Lakes and spent a couple of months up there and then they sent me to school. I went to electrician school. I had telephone background, I'd worked for the phone company. So they sent me to electrician school. And then they sent me up to San Francisco, and we stayed on Treasure Island. I had more training in firing different guns practice with ??? and the ??? engine type on the California coast. Then they sent me to sea. We went on transports with 5,000 other ??? and went to Hawaii. And then from Hawaii we went to Ulysses, that's a little coral atoll where apparently a big amount of the fleet, the Pacific fleet, was. When we got there then they'd start. Of these 5,000, they'd start calling names, and they sent so many to this ship and so many to that ship and they kept going down the line. I thought, what are they going to do just push me overboard. Anyhow, they finally called my name and I was named to the USS RABY.

MR. MORRIS: What kind of a ship was that?

MR. JOHNSON: That was a destroyer escort and we called it "the mad dog" for more reasons than one. When I was aboard ship, we'd go into get refueled with the other ship. And we'd bang into them knock something off, and they were always kidding the skipper he was a mad dog. I got aboard ship and worked with a fine crew on it, Quad 40, but after two weeks the skipper called me up. I thought, well, what did I do wrong this time. And he said, "You know code?" And I said, "Yes, the Morse code." He said, "You're now a radioman." So I was a radioman until the end of the war. Our duty was submarine and parachute rescue, things like that. Our base was Guam and we'd start out from there and head south. After a week or so planes would fly over, and then they come back and say, "There's somebody down at such and such a point." So we'd go to that point and pick them up. Usually airmen that got shot down either fighting over Turk or Truk, so we rescued a number of pilots that way at different times.

MR. MORRIS: When were you actually assigned to the RABY, month and year?

MR. JOHNSON: I went overseas in January and I guess about the end of January, 1944.

MR. MORRIS: When they called your name and you went on the RABY, you went right to

Guam and started patrolling from there?

MR. JOHNSON: Yes, we went up there. Apparently that was the base at that time. From there we ran all the way down to New Guinea and then on back up to different islands, the Marianas on up to ??? or what ever else. I've forgotten what was north of there. We were supposed to go and help with leading into Japan but the war ended. We saw these planes fly over not knowing at the time that they were carrying the big bombs. We were through all this section, the Admiralties, New Ireland, New Guinea.

MR. MORRIS: Did your ship ever take part in any of these marine invasions as support craft or anything?

MR. JOHNSON: Only as protecting the other ships that were bombing the islands. Usually the big ships were closer in than we were and we were anti-submarine protection.

MR. MORRIS: Was there a point during the war when you stopped worrying about Japanese subs, or right up to the bitter end were you looking for them?

MR. JOHNSON: Right up to the end.

MR. MORRIS: They were always a threat?

MR. JOHNSON: Yes, although we had pretty well taken care of most of them because it got so that we would go sometimes four days and just form a line and take off subs in that period.

MR. MORRIS: I guess by that time you had sonar and all that other gear?

MR. JOHNSON: Oh, yes.

MR. MORRIS: Wasn't there another type before sonar?

MR. JOHNSON: I heard sonar being talked about, but being a radioman you were pretty much in on everything that went on. You had to type 60 words a minute in code groups of five letters which looking at it meant nothing, but then they take the printed things and run them through the code machine and it would come out in English. The code machines were changed once a day, if I remember. Our yeomen and probably one of the officers handled that. They had these discs and they changed the discs and that would change for each day. So if we got something on Monday we'd have that printed, then something from Tuesday, they'd change the discs and that made Tuesday's come out okay.

MR. MORRIS: So you were on the RABY until the end of the war?

MR. JOHNSON: Yes.

MR. MORRIS: Let me go back a little bit, did you have to do a boot camp before you did your

navy flight school or did they just put you right into the flight school?

MR. JOHNSON: Right into the flight school program. Murray, Kentucky, was the beginning and we were taught how to drill and so forth, and we were taught recognition and they began with code. Then we'd start other navy traditions, but we didn't really have any boot camp. The closest I came to that was after I washed out and went to Great Lakes. Since we had already had different trainings, there wasn't much they could do for us there. We could swim and we knew procedures.

MR. MORRIS: And then you went to California, and from there you went to radio school, or electronics?

MR. JOHNSON: I was assigned that and sent to California, but the time was brief there so I really didn't go to radio school. The code I had learned when I was in the cadet program.

MR. MORRIS: What sort of living conditions did they have at Treasure Island, big barracks living?

MR. JOHNSON: Yes, they had barracks and we were given liberty every other day because we were getting nervous waiting for being shipped out. The day you were on, you just stayed on the island. The day you were off, you went into San Francisco or Oakland.

MR. MORRIS: How were the civilians when you went to San Francisco or Oakland, were they really nervous about the war?

MR. JOHNSON: Well, GIs and sailors and soldiers were kind of looked up to. If you went in that hotel, somebody would buy your meal. If you went in a bar, they would buy you a drink. They didn't seem to be too concerned. Of course, they were concerned but not worried. San Francisco was really a great liberty town with all kinds of things to do there. Some of the people just sort of opened their houses to you and you could go there and just sleep overnight in a bedroom, or they'd give you a meal or whatever.

MR. MORRIS: Just drag you off the street.

MR. JOHNSON: Well, you just went because somebody said that's a good place to go, so you'd go and try them. And the dates were easy to get, too. You could date different girls, nothing serious. Seemed like most of them were engaged to some guy that was already in the service, but they'd go out with you. In fact, I had a couple of real good friends while I was there.

MR. MORRIS: On board ship, did you have a special group of guys you hung around with?

MR. JOHNSON: Well, it wasn't much hanging around. You were on duty four hours and you

were off four hours. At night that meant sleep and sometimes the off time was when you ate. Of course, the radio group were separate from other parts. I used to go below deck just to get to know the fellows. I had a job as captain's talker which meant I stood up with the captain during any time we were in a serious situation. I always laughed, I was the highest part on the ship. He was right here and I stood right in front of him. He would say, "Tell the rear engine room such and such." That was my job to relay that to them.

MR. MORRIS: What sort of a armament did the rating carry?

MR. JOHNSON: We had depth charges. We had torpedoes and we had different sized guns but the biggest was only quad 40s, I guess, and we had three 3-inch front, middle and back, and after the war, I think, came back and took the three inch off and put five inch. Most of it was depth charge stuff, not much reason to use the guns as such.

MR. MORRIS: Did you ever force yourself to surface or anything like that?

MR. JOHNSON: Yes, we got one, course that's when the four of us were warned.

MR. MORRIS: The four ships as a team?

MR. JOHNSON: Yes, 4 dts and it came to the surface, and two of them took it somewhere, I don't know, probably two, one of the nearby bases.

MR. MORRIS: Oh, they captured it?

MR. JOHNSON: Yes.

MR. MORRIS: Crew and all?

MR. JOHNSON: Yes. I don't know the name of the sub, I don't think I knew at that time.

MR. MORRIS: Was this a standard, you mentioned before about getting four of these guys together, was that a standard like hunting ???

MR. JOHNSON: Well, at times it was. When the subs were, right at first when there were too many and we had troop transports and supply ships coming through, they would do that, join into three or four ??? We touched a lot of islands that were invaded from the New Guineas. Of course, we started out at the Ulysses and went up to Guam and then came down to the Carolinas. Truk was never taken. It was just cut off and they couldn't get any supplies in and couldn't get out. They did that with two or three islands, what was some of the others, I think there were a couple of Marshall Islands that were cut off.

MR. MORRIS: Then when they cut off an island, did they just put a couple of ship blockade around it and just sit there?

MR. JOHNSON: Well, I don't know if they sat there but they watched it and kept any supply ships from coming in. Between the planes flying over it and ships like us, or some of the bigger ships, they would take care of supply ships coming in. First, winding down, somewhat, after we got to Guam and Saipan and on up to Iwo Jima and Okinawa got all the way up there, we stood out for protection ???

MR. MORRIS: Was there what we call a monsoon season, is that real weather problems as far as sailing?

MR. JOHNSON: Was there! Yes, when we left Guam one time with a convoy we were going up, I think, to Iwo Jima. This typhoon hit and it sank some of the small ships. We were rocking so much we thought we were going to tip over but we didn't, thank goodness. But they did lose a destroyer escort that way. One of them went down in a terrible storm, and we lost the convoy. We had radioed what to do and they said, "Go back to Guam." They had these skipper's radiomen on these ships in the convoy go different places, and that was really rough. We went through another lesser storm, just heavy rains and winds and high seas. We had a gauge that we could watch ship falls.

MR. MORRIS: Was there a limit in the numbers that if you went that far you were going to go?

MR. JOHNSON: Yes. we had hit that number quite often, but we didn't go over, obviously. Another thing we did, we had to go get fuel and supplies for our own ship quite often. We would stop at some island that had been secured where there was supplies. People get it and load up the whale boats and bring them back.

MR. MORRIS: Did you always refuel at sea or were there islands with deep enough harbors to get in?

MR. JOHNSON: Yes, there were some islands. Quite often we refueled at sea as we were away from everything. I guess when we were in the Carolinas we maybe touched an island or two for refueling. We quite often would get close to a big ship, like maybe a cruiser. We couldn't join up to it but we'd stand off and they'd get close enough to hook up a fuel line. The line would be like that between the two ships and you had to be careful that we didn't get too far out and break it.

MR. MORRIS: Or too close.

MR. JOHNSON: And you'd bang. In fact, we picked up one admiral, I don't remember who it was now, but he was on one of the cruisers and he came over on a line in a little chair. And we

had men on our deck holding one end of the line, men on the cruiser holding the other end. They'd shot a line over and that's how we would pull him. Well, of course, the two ships are going like this and ???coming and he got dunked. But he was very nice about it, he came out laughing.

MR. MORRIS: Did you ever get liberty?

MR. JOHNSON: Yes, we'd go ashore on some islands. Like at Guam we'd go ashore.

MR. MORRIS: Was there anything to do? Any USO shows or anything?

MR. JOHNSON: No, Guam was nothing, really, except the harbor and you could go down the beach a ways and ???. The place had been pretty well shot up and the people that lived there were pretty much back in the woods now. There was one kamikaze came in while we were coming into Guam and he missed us. He was aiming at something in the harbor but he never made it because everything in the harbor was shooting at him. And they just sort of blew him up in the sky and he crashed on the island.

MR. MORRIS: Where would a kamikaze like that come from, a carrier?

MR. JOHNSON: I don't really know where he came from. Really too long a flight to come from Japan, so he must have come off of some carrier somewhere.

MR. MORRIS: Did your ship ever get attacked by aircraft or subs or anything?

MR. JOHNSON: No. Well, one torpedo hit us but it didn't go off.

MR. MORRIS: That was lucky.

MR. JOHNSON: Yes, it was.

MR. MORRIS: How do you react to something like that? Does everyone know the torpedo is on its way. Does it klunk against the hull?

MR. JOHNSON: No, I saw it coming and I screamed where it was but, of course, that was too late. I just ran across to the other side to get away from where it was going to hit. And then it didn't explode which, thank goodness, it would have just about blown the ship in half.

MR. MORRIS: Where was that? Do you recall?

MR. JOHNSON: Not off hand, somewhere out in the Pacific. We crossed the equator any number of times. We had duty on different islands, we called it ping pong duty, 'cause all we did was go back and forth, back and forth in front of a harbor. That was to keep any ship that might try to sneak in, and that was pretty monotonous because we'd do it sometimes for a week and sometimes two weeks, back and forth, back and forth.

MR. MORRIS: When you did that, were you like on alert or high alert, or just normal ship activities?

MR. JOHNSON: Just normal, and if something needed to be, they'd call us, muster high alert.

MR. MORRIS: Do you remember the first time they ever did that general quarters? Do you recall the first incident on ship?

MR. JOHNSON: Yes, on the troop ship going over.

MR. MORRIS: You were being transported or were you part of the crew?

MR. JOHNSON: No, we were being transported. I was kind of like part of the crew because I volunteered to carry food from down in the hold to different parts which I felt give me something to do to keep me busy instead of just sitting around.

MR. MORRIS: And what was the general quarters about?

MR. JOHNSON: On the troop ship?

MR. MORRIS: Yes.

MR. JOHNSON: I think it was a safety measure more than anything. There was some airplanes that flew over and they wanted to make sure the ship was ready. They were friendly, I think they were sent out to protect us.

MR. MORRIS: When you initiated an attack against the sub or something, did they sound general quarters?

MR. JOHNSON: Yes.

MR. MORRIS: How was that the first time you did that?

MR. JOHNSON: Each person had duties, and I was in the radio shack, but my duty was up as captain's talker. This is the same with everybody else. Those that had duties somewhere, like fellows on the guns had to go to the guns, if they weren't there.

MR. MORRIS: I guess as the captain's talker, you were pretty much right in the center of whatever decision is going to be made. You're right there passing the word.

MR. JOHNSON: That's right.

MR. MORRIS: I had another interesting job. I was to burn papers that they no longer wanted which meant that, and this was only certain times like late in the evening or late in the afternoon, so that the ash wasn't picked up by anybody. We burned it in a cage but I always read them to see what's in it. I learned a lot going on from reading them and then I burned them. That was interesting.

MR. MORRIS: How was the food?

MR. JOHNSON: Passing fair, fact, sometimes when we'd be at an island, we'd have some of the marines or soldiers come aboard just to get something to eat. They'd find out the name of one of the seaman and get permission to come aboard and see the seaman. And they'd stay and eat which was fine for them.

MR. MORRIS: I guess these islands were so shot up that there probably wasn't a lot of fresh fruit or anything like that growing on them.

MR. JOHNSON: No. We got some oranges, mostly oranges and apples, that was about the extent of our fresh fruit.

MR. MORRIS: Did you ever have any tragedies aboard ship?

MR. JOHNSON: Mostly from somebody getting hurt falling or something like that. I don't think we had any casualties from any action that I recall.

MR. MORRIS: How did you hear that the war ended? Were you cruising or were you stationed at any particular place?

MR. JOHNSON: We were at sea when it came over the radio.

MR. MORRIS: Did they ever announce that they had dropped this big huge bomb? Did they tell you about that? I guess everybody was glad to hear all of this.

MR. JOHNSON: Oh, boy, the war was over and we could go home. They tried to get us to reenlist.

MR. MORRIS: How long after the war ended did the ship continue to sail? Did you ever get to Japan?

MR. JOHNSON: Never did. We were lying off the coast, we could just barely see the outline, but that is the closest we ever got. When the war ended, we just headed home. It took a month. We knew it was headed in the right way.

MR. MORRIS: Did you stop everywhere, or did it take that long to get across the Pacific Ocean?

MR. JOHNSON: Well, we stopped in Hawaii. It just took that long, we were not a fast ship.

MR. MORRIS: Actually, what was your rate of speed?

MR. JOHNSON: I think it was around, well, cruising probably about 15, but I think we could go to twenty or twenty two.

MR. MORRIS: What were things like when you stopped in Hawaii? Did you get any liberty in

Hawaii or just stop in.

MR. JOHNSON: No, we got off over night while the ship was refueling and stuff.

MR. MORRIS: What was the atmosphere like in Hawaii?

MR. JOHNSON: I don't particularly remember because we went to a restaurant and all we ordered was fresh tomatoes and milk.

MR. MORRIS: That's all you wanted. So where did you land on the coast, like in San Francisco?

MR. JOHNSON: No, we landed in San Pedro. We were there for, I guess, close to a month before I went home. By this time I had forty-one points, so I could get out.

MR. MORRIS: Could you explain the point system to me?

MR. JOHNSON: Well, as well as I remember the amount of time you were in service, I guess each month you got credit for and as time went on it just filled up.

MR. MORRIS: Did one specialty get more or was it just a time factor? Like if you were a chief petty officer, could you get extra points?

MR. JOHNSON: I don't think so, just a matter of how long you were in service.

MR. MORRIS: Did you get any extra points for a particular engagement? If you were in a major engagement you didn't get one. I never really understood that point thing. When did you finally get home?

MR. JOHNSON: The first of December, and I went right back to work with the phone company, and they gave me two weeks vacation.

MR. MORRIS: You went right back and they turned around and gave you two weeks off?

MR. JOHNSON: Yes, which gave me time off over Christmas.

MR. MORRIS: Were things any different when you got home? Of course, they had been under rationing and all that stuff, but was it a big adjustment when you got home?

MR. JOHNSON: Yes, kind of, you're happy about it. You're free and don't have to go back, got your discharge and everything, big time. How much longer have we got?

MR. MORRIS: Well, I think we're pretty much done. Is there any special incident that you recall that you'd like to talk about, any particular commanders or crew mates you've kept in touch with or anything.

MR. JOHNSON: Yes, Joe Waller was on the gun that I was on and I see him about once a year at a navy reunion. I see some of the others that were on that gun and I see some of the fellows,

well, one time I saw another radioman that came to the reunion. He doesn't come anymore. In fact, none of them are able to come now.

MR. MORRIS: The skipper, any of the executives officers, have any contact with them after you were discharged?

MR. JOHNSON: We had one officer that came, that was all. He came two or three times but I haven't seen him lately. We had another officer named Burkowitz, a lieutenant I think, he still comes. A lot of the officers have died. Of course, a lot of the men have died, too. It's been over fifty years. The only funny thing that happened was when they went to get supplies, we were up on deck and we'd see them coming. They'd have all this stuff and we had one fellow named Arkie, and we'd say, "Arkie, throw us an orange." So he'd pick one up and throw it up to us. This officer was standing there and he threw one and it hit him right in the hip, knocked his hat off, but he was a pretty good Joe.

MR. MORRIS: He didn't take that too seriously?

MR. JOHNSON: No.

MR. MORRIS: Well, unless there's something else, I guess that will probably do it. Thanks for your time. I appreciate your doing this.

Transcribed October 24, 2005 by Eunice Gary