

# Interview with Rufus Johnson

## Interviewed by Ed Metzler

This is Ed Metzler and today is the 27 of March 2005. I am interviewing Colonel Rufus Johnson. This interview is taking place in Kerrville, Texas. The interview is in support of the Center for Pacific War Studies, Archives for the National Museum of the Pacific War, Texas Parks and Wildlife, for the preservation of historical information related to this site. Colonel Johnson let me start out by thanking you for spending the time with me this afternoon to talk a little bit about your experiences.

**Mr. Johnson:** You're welcome.

**Mr. Metzler:** Would you be willing to start by letting me know when, and where you were born and a little about your parents?

**Mr. Johnson:** Yes.

**Mr. Metzler:** So you were born when and where?

**Mr. Johnson:** Rufus Winfield Johnson, born in Montgomery County Maryland, May 1, 1911. Was the son of Charles L. Johnson and Margaret Smith Johnson, both of Montgomery County, now deceased. He and his wife, Vonda Louise, married since 1971 presently reside in the foothills of the Ozarks at Route 2, Box 220 A Hogarth (?) Prairie Grove, Arkansas. There are no children of the marriage.

From age four, he was reared by an uncle and maternal aunt in Hoatsville ,(?) Pennsylvania, where he attended elementary and high schools. He received his AB degree from Howard University, Washington, D.C., in 1934. He attended graduate school there from 1934 to 1936. He then switched to law school, on a scholarship, receiving his LLB degree from Howard University School of Law in 1939.

His military experience: Upon graduating from the under-graduate school in Howard University in 1934, he also graduated from ROTC and received his commission as a Second Lieutenant in the United States Army Reserve. While preparing for the DC Bar, he worked as a butler for FDR, for the FDR family and became the first civilian employee from the White House Staff to enter the armed forces during the 1941 emergency. He spent five years in the US Army in World War Two, serving with the 92<sup>nd</sup> Division in action in Italy as a combat infantry company commander.

During the Korean crisis he served for a period of three years. When he returned from overseas, he became Staff Judge Advocate at Fort Macarthur, San Pedro, California and was the first black officer to serve as Staff Judge Advocate of any military base in the United States. While in the military service, he received the CID, Bronze Star, Purple Heart and a special regimental citation for bravery.

He is retired from the US Armed Forces Reserve program with the rank of Lieutenant Colonel.

He has been admitted to the United States Supreme Court Bar, the bar of the Supreme Court of South Korea, the Washington DC District Court of Appeals, the Bar of the Supreme Court of California and the Bar of the US District Court for the southern district of California. He was engaged in private practice law in Washington DC from 1945 to 1948, Los Angeles, California, 1952 to 1954. Santa Bernardino, California, 1954 to 1978. He maintained a branch office in Santa Barbara, California from 1956 to 1958. He represented the Navajo Indians in the case of, People vs. Woody (?) at 61 Cal 2, 716, which the California Supreme Court ruled that use of peyote, as a religious sacrament by American Indians was protected by the First Amendment of the United States Constitution.

Presently he is residing in Texas. He is engaged in transcribing the memoirs of his military experiences of cases involving his private practice.

His membership in organizations include California State and San Bernardino County Bar Associations, American Judicature Society, Tadac (?) Association, American Academy of Political and Social Science, the NAACP, ACLU, Masonic Lodge, the Consistory (?), and the Shriner's and the Baptist Church. He is a second degree Mason and a fifth degree black belt in Shoran Raiyu (?) Karate.

- Mr. Metzler:** So what part of that are you most proud of?
- Mr. Johnson:** All of it.
- Mr. Metzler:** I think you should be. And what part of that do you have the most memories about of your life?
- Mr. Johnson:** Probably World War Two.
- Mr. Metzler:** Tell me about what it was like being in Italy, fighting the Germans during World War Two. What was that like?
- Mr. Johnson:** We started off with a hundred and five ships sailing. Five of them were sunk by the Germans on the way over. But none of the men were lost. They were, they had, I had been chosen to give them combat swimming before the left Dover. (?) They all were saved.
- Mr. Metzler:** By golly that paid off didn't it?
- Mr. Johnson:** Yes it did.
- Mr. Metzler:** And they turned out to be good swimmers?
- Mr. Johnson:** Yes. They were floating till they were picked up.

- Mr. Metzler:** So these were troop ships then that were.....?
- Mr. Johnson:** Yes. One hundred and five troop ships.
- Mr. Metzler:** The ships that were sunk, was this from aircraft, or submarines?
- Mr. Johnson:** Submarines. German operations off, in the Atlantic Ocean.
- Mr. Metzler:** So they came into the Mediterranean?
- Mr. Johnson:** Yes. When we reached the Mediterranean, the convoy was directed to North Africa while they cleared the path to Sicily to land. At that time, there was a bandit that was preying on American sailors when they got off the ship and this bandit came up to me and said, "Give me your money, or I'll cut your damn throat."
- Mr. Metzler:** Now what kind of bandit is this, like an Arab, or a.....?
- Mr. Johnson:** He was an Arab.
- Mr. Metzler:** And so you just let him cut your throat, right?
- Mr. Johnson:** He tried to, but I was armed with a .45. Officers were permitted, on troop ships, they kept their firearms. Everybody else had firearms on a deal. (?)
- Mr. Metzler:** So you were a captain at this time?
- Mr. Johnson:** Yes. I pulled my .45 and shot him.
- Mr. Metzler:** And that's the last you heard from him?
- Mr. Johnson:** Well he had been, they had a warrant out for him. I think there was a ten thousand dollar reward for him and I got that ten thousand dollar reward.
- Mr. Metzler:** What did you do with all that money?
- Mr. Johnson:** I sent it home to my wife.
- Mr. Metzler:** Now this was in North Africa that this happened? Algeria, or Tunisia?
- Mr. Johnson:** North Africa. Let's see. It was a port from the Strait of Gibraltar, instead of going to the Mediterranean; we were rerouted to North Africa till they cleared the route to Italy from submarines. At that time, we had already used up all the film, movie film, five, or six, times coming overseas and I wanted to change, exchange in North Africa for new films for the men. I got in a

rowboat and went to shore. After that they pressed an order that nobody could go ashore unless they were accompanied by armed guards.

**Mr. Metzler:** Did you get some new movies?

**Mr. Johnson:** Yeah. I got new movies?

**Mr. Metzler:** What were they?

**Mr. Johnson:** They were different movies. Different from what we already had, because going over we would show the same ones over and over.

**Mr. Metzler:** Everybody knew the plot. Did the boys appreciate getting those new movies?

**Mr. Johnson:** Of course. Yes, they were tickled to death.

**Mr. Metzler:** So when you left North Africa, then you went into Sicily, is that right?

**Mr. Johnson:** That's correct.

**Mr. Metzler:** So you were with, which Division?

**Mr. Johnson:** 92<sup>nd</sup> Division.

**Mr. Metzler:** 92<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division. Is that right?

**Mr. Johnson:** That's right.

**Mr. Metzler:** Who was your commander?

**Mr. Johnson:** Almond.

**Mr. Metzler:** Almond. OK. Was he a two star general?

**Mr. Johnson:** A two star general.

**Mr. Metzler:** Do you remember, when you landed on Sicily, was there a lot of resistance, or was that an easy landing, when you got into Sicily?

**Mr. Johnson:** There was no resistance, because the..... There was some resistance, we had to fight when we landed in Sicily, we had to, that's when the fight started all the way up. Mussolini was an ally of Hitler. The Italians, when we landed, they would all, the American soldiers and if the American soldiers were driven back, they shift over to the other side. When they would shift over to the other side, the Germans just shot 'em for desertion. That's what they did. That happened a number of times.

- Mr. Metzler:** Weren't the British, also, a part of that expeditionary force? They were under Montgomery weren't they?
- Mr. Johnson:** Yes.
- Mr. Metzler:** And where was general, wasn't General Patton part of our expedition?
- Mr. Johnson:** Yes.
- Mr. Metzler:** What did you ever hear about him, if anything?
- Mr. Johnson:** General Patton and General Almond. General Almond always went over Patton's head, because his wife (?) was married of the Chief of Staff in Washington. He would always go over Patton's head to Washington to get whatever he wanted.
- Mr. Metzler:** That must have made Patton happy?
- Mr. Johnson:** Well it so happened that general, in what the assignment was given to the other troops to....Oh! The north Apennine (?) line was established, was supposed to be, hold the line for our spring (?) offensive. There was a hill outside of that whenever the company commander, which I covered, (?) was assigned a position, it was, "Take Georgia." A hill called Georgia. And they would order one officer and twenty men to take Georgia. Actually, when Georgia was taken, it took a whole battalion of that Indian regiment, the 442, two days of fighting and they had to pull back and bomb it for three days before they could take it. He was ordering an officer and twenty men to take Georgia which was just suicide. Whenever it came to the officers to give you all the orders from (unintelligible) to march out there and see what Big Bertha was flish (?), so our airplanes could bomb that spot.
- Mr. Metzler:** So Big Bertha was one of their.....?
- Mr. Johnson:** Was one of those big guns. Guns the Germans had. What the Germans would do, they would cover Big Bertha over and artificial flicen (?) come from somewhere else; to make you think .....and when they bombed that place, it wouldn't get Big Bertha.
- Mr. Metzler:** Those Germans were tricky.
- Mr.. Johnson:** Yeah, in that deal.
- Mr. Metzler:** So you actually had to storm the hill with infantry to take Georgia? And you were part of that?

- Mr. Johnson:** That's correct.
- Mr. Metzler:** Tell me about that.
- Mr. Johnson:** Well they told me to take an officer and twenty men. I said, "Well what I'll do, I'll take two officers and forty men and I'll be the other officer." When we got almost to the top of Georgia, I looked around and there was only one man left and he was wounded.
- Mr. Metzler:** Out of the whole forty?
- Mr. Johnson:** Yes. Had been cut down.
- Mr. Metzler:** So what was this, mostly German machine gun fire, or.....?
- Mr. Johnson:** Well Italy and Germany would join together against the.....
- Mr. Metzler:** Right. They were allies.
- Mr. Johnson: They were allies. They, oh, it was Mussolini was the head of that. Anyway they, there was only out of number I carried there was one man left and me and the other man left and I was able to, I looked up and saw three Germans above, with, and I killed all, I shot all three of them and as they were about to pull their grenade that they were going to pull and throw down. Just as they pulled the pin, I shot them and they dropped on top of it and when it went off, it blew them up.
- Mr. Metzler:** Is that what they called the potato masher, those old German grenades with the ling handles? You see those in the movies.
- Mr. Johnson:** Yes.
- Mr. Metzler:** Now, who, this wounded man who was with you, was he the one wounded in the arm, or do you remember?
- Mr. Johnson:** I think he was wounded in the leg. I had to carry him on my shoulder back to the line. He and I were the only ones to get back to the line.
- Mr. Metzler:** What did you do then when you got back to the lines?
- Mr. Johnson:** I went in to see Almond, General Almond and (laughs) in joining him, his chief of staff was a captain and he said, "You can't go in there." and I smashed him over the head with the butt of my rifle and grabbed his carbine and threw it away and left him laying down there and went in to see Almond and Almond said, he pointed to his star and said, "I didn't give you permission to come in here." He pointed to his star and I said, "I don't see anything but

some metal up there and all that metal the Jerrys threw on me, if I was a, I didn't bother me at all and that little two pieces of metal on each of his shoulders don't bother me either." I looked up there and I grabbed his, he had a belt with an automatic in there and, also, another belt with a carbine, hanging up. I took his automatic and threw it away and I started to smash it and he said, "Oh, don't, please don't break that. That was a gift from the manufacturer specially made for me", on that, so instead of breaking it, I threw it, slung it away so he couldn't get it. (laughs) I grabbed him and turned him around and kicked him, head over heels. He reached for a table and, just as he touched the table, it tipped over and come and hit him on the head as it fell down in that deal. When I left, he ran out and said, told the, oh, they had told Mark Clark that I was mad and I was going to see General Almond. Mark Clark found out what I had done and he says, Oh.....Armond couldn't prosecute me, because he was the one, the complainant on that. He had to go the next higher commander to be prosecuted. That was Mark Clark. And Mark Clark said to me, and Almond said to, "I'll relieve you of command (?). He said. "No. I just want to congratulate you. You did something that should have been done long time ago. Kick your damn ass." (laughs loudly).

- Mr. Metzler:** That is a good story. Sounds like he deserved it. So was he still your commanding officer after that?
- Mr. Johnson:** Let's see. Yes, but I was transferred to the 442<sup>nd</sup> infantry, they were the Navajo Indians that was drawn and I am, actually, I think they said seventh degree (?) Navajo.
- Mr. Metzler:** So you are part Navajo?
- Mr. Johnson:** Yes, Part Navajo and they wanted me to be, to join, let's see, I am a Navajo, there is a mix up there. The Navajo and the other group don't get along. I'm sorry, I don't know what....(woman's voice says, "Cherokee?") Yes, Cherokee. They don't get along and the Cherokee didn't know it was part Navajo. They made an honorary chief of the Navajos, the Cherokees didn't know, and they didn't inform the Cherokees that I was Navajo.
- Mr. Metzler:** So what else happened to you in the campaigns in Italy? I know you were in three campaigns, at least. The Po River Valley, the Rome-Arno (?) and.....
- Mr. Johnson:** And the North Apennine (?) campaign, all three of them, yeah. Lets see, there was a lot of spring offensives in Italy. I was a part of that.
- Mr. Metzler:** What were the Italian people like when you were there? Did they treat you all as heroes, or.....
- Mr. Johnson:** Oh Yeah. They all treated us as heroes. I think, the Italian women, instead, when they waved goodbye, the do it that way, instead of that way. They wave

kind of backwards. And the American soldiers thought they were waving for them to come back. (laughs).

**Mr. Metzler:** Well everybody does things different.

**Mr. Johnson:** We had to put armed guards on the convoy to keep the guys from jumping off and going back to these women that were waving for them to come back.

**Mr. Metzler:** Now I was reading something about Company K of the Seventy-First Infantry. Were you involved in rescuing them when they were pinned down somewhere? What happened there?

**Mr. Johnson:** Yes. Company K. Oh, the Germans would, they would make a pincher movement and cut off a unit and then wipe out that unit. That's the way they operated. I was given, I took a machine gun and . . . .two machine guns and a mortar, a 60 mm mortar and was set to keep the Germans from closing in that area while the Americans retreated back to the main line on the deal. This guy was operating it, I think they had ten rounds of the 60 mm mortar, and he fired five of them and they hadn't hit nothing on the deal. I said, "Wait a minute." And I told him, "Get out of the way." I changed the deal, the settings on them and I dropped all five rounds, right in the center where they were trying to close and there was bodies, arms and legs and heads going up in the air. It opened, the rest of the men were able to retreat back to the main line.

**Mr. Metzler:** Do you consider the Germans to really be a tough foe to try and beat? Were they hard to fight?

**Mr. Johnson:** Yeah. Hitler was running out of manpower because he was down low and had begun to use old men and young boys on that because those main troopers, he was running low on them and he was filling in with young boys and old men.

**Mr. Metzler:** So did you see any young boys or old men?

**Mr. Johnson:** Well I was, oh, they surrounded, when we ran out of ammo, they captured the troops that were there and they felt that, they asked them, and all they gave was name, rank and serial number. When they gave the name, rank and serial number the Germans just shot them in the head. They came to me and I gave them a name, rank and serial number and they, there was a captain and there was an order that an officer had to be transported to Headquarters and questioned because he had more information. The information about the number of troops and everything else in that deal. They started to take me to the Headquarters; there was one in front and one behind with those rifles with long bayonets, armed.

**Mr. Metzler:** Now how did they capture you?



- Mr. Johnson:** They surrounded, I mean, after we ran out of ammunition, they just surrounded us and there was nothing we could do. As these guys identified themselves, they would shoot them.
- Mr. Metzler:** So they shot your guys right there?
- Mr. Johnson:** Right there, yeah. When they fell, an officer.....
- Mr. Metzler:** They took you back?
- Mr. Johnson:** They had to take me back because it was orders. I had information they would get out of me before.
- Mr. Metzler:** Well, tell me what happened.
- Mr. Johnson:** On the way back, we got to, there was a little stream of water. I would walk up fast and slow down and just as we got to the stream of water, I stepped aside and the guy shoved me with a bayonet and I stepped aside and I pushed it through the guy in front of me; right through his body. I grabbed the other guy with a chokehold and broke his neck. Then I was free to go back. I took the barrel off of one of their rifles. They were on the way back.....the Italians kept chestnuts (?) in the cellar (?) and this, I was in there with a tube, sticking up, getting air and they heard a noise in there and they looked in there and two rats were fighting. They said, "Oh, that's OK, " and they left.
- Mr. Metzler:** So, let me see if I understand. You went and hide in a cellar, an Italian cellar? Underneath a bunch of chestnuts, with a little tube sticking up so you could breath?
- Mr. Johnson:** Yeah.
- Mr. Metzler:** And then there was a noise in there and the Germans looked in, or the Italians?
- Mr. Johnson:** Yeah.
- Mr. Metzler:** They thought it might be you, but they saw the rats fighting and they figured that's what it was and then they left.
- Mr. Johnson:** Right.
- Mr. Metzler:** Well you had some rats save you then, huh?
- Mr. Johnson:** Yeah. (laughs)
- Mr. Metzler:** Then what happened?

- Mr. Johnson:** I waited till dark and there were...Oh, on the way back the German's, I noticed a patrol (?) and when he passed the area I was quite and slipped passed him back to my lines. When I got back to my lines the guy said, "Give the sign!" There was a sign and counter-sign. You give a sign and you get a counter sign. They change it every twenty-four hours. I said, "I don't know the damn counter sign. I'm just Captain Johnson." And they said, "Oh, captain Johnson, advance and be recognized. Then I go back to my own lines.
- Mr. Metzler:** So you had been gone more than twenty-four hours, or you would have known the sign and the counter sign?
- Mr. Johnson:** Right.
- Mr.. Metzler:** What a story. So you were a very lucky man.
- Mr. Johnson:** Yeah.
- Mr. Metzler:** That's really interesting. Tell me about the group that you commanded? Were they all black soldiers?
- Mr. Johnson:** Yes.
- Mr. Metzler:** I mean everybody's heard a lot about the segregated Army during World War Two. What was t like being in the segregated Army?
- Mr. Johnson:** It was difficult because the Negroes were put in (unintelligible) divisions. They did the training, but what they would do, is hold the, at Fort Benning, would graduate a group of officers, Second Lieutenants. They would hold them there three months and promote them to First Lieutenants and then transfer them to the 92<sup>nd</sup> Division and they would be ahead of the Second Lieutenants, colored there (?) and move on up to our.....each three months they were eligible for transfer to a higher grade. So the higher grades were filling up with white officers, but the Negroes never advanced. When it was time to go overseas, there were two other Divisions already trained with combat swimming. Almond (?) had concentrated on his trench building and mortar fire and hadn't given these guys combat swimming. The Red Cross had decided to let him down easy and tell him that unless he had combat swimming, he couldn't be chosen to go overseas. He was short ten officers, that were taken from a colored unit, and sent to Almond's unit to fill it out. He didn't want, they were all captains, and he didn't want them there. He let them sit there over a couple of days.
- Mr. Metzler:** Sit where?
- Mr. Johnson:** Out side of his office.

- Mr. Metzler:** For two days?
- Mr. Johnson:** For two days he walked by and didn't say anything, but when the Red Cross told him his unit couldn't go overseas unless they had combat swimming and they went there to let him down, and the guys saw me and he said, "Wait a minute. There's a guy out there that is a swimming instructor and he is able to give the necessary swimming instruction for overseas."
- Mr. Metzler:** How did they know you were a swimming instructor?
- Mr. Johnson:** Because I had taken them, it was the Red Cross representative that come to tell him that they couldn't give him, they were tied up and couldn't schedule him.
- Mr. Metzler:** OK.
- Mr. Johnson:** When he saw me, he just told him that. When he saw me he went back and asked him who the guys were out there. He told them, "You had a problem and your problem is solved. There's one guy out here who is able to give your unit combat swimming.
- Mr. Metzler:** Tell me what was going through your mind that two days you had to sit there waiting to see the General. You must be a patient person?
- Mr. Johnson:** We didn't know that he would avoid coming by us because he didn't too return our salutes and go passed us without even.....he let us sit there.
- Mr. Metzler:** Was he sneaking in the back door?
- Mr. Johnson:** Yeah, to pass us up. There was one guy who, one of his mess sergeants would slip us food, while we sat there. When he found out, the guy said," Watt a minute, your problem's solved. There is a guy here that can give you combat swimming." Then he came out there and accepted all ten officers.
- Mr. Metzler:** So you ended up bailing him out of a jam. So you trained these guys to swim?
- Mr. Johnson:** Yeah.
- Mr. Metzler:** How long.....?
- Mr.: Johnson:** To keep afloat until they were picked up.
- Mr. Metzler:** That training occurred where, at Fort Benning?
- Mr. Johnson:** Yeah. There was a hundred and five ships going overseas and five of them were sunk, but not a man was lost because they were picked up by other boats.

- Mr. Metzler:** That is something to be proud of. You had a hand in that. So did you get seasick when you went overseas on those ships?
- Mr. Johnson:** No, not particularly.
- Mr. Metzler:** Some people I know get really sick when they get on a ship and I was just curious to know whether you had, or not.
- Mr. Johnson:** No. For some reason I didn't get sick.
- Mr. Metzler:** So if we go back now to Italy and you, if you'll pardon my use of the phrase, you kicked General Almonds' rear end, I'll clean it up, and after that were you in him on pretty good terms, or.....(Side A Ends)...
- SIDE B:**
- Mr. Johnson:** ...through my company commander, my battalion commander and regimental....(tape pauses)....That I was going to decorate him for it. He turned it down. But the regimental commander was able to give a bronze star without General Almond, so I got a bronze star instead of a silver star.
- Mr. Metzler:** Let me see if I got this right. You were up for a silver star, and it went all the way up to your favorite general, General Almond and he turned you down and he said, "There was no way I'm going to give you that kind of honor for kicking my ass."
- Mr. Johnson:** Right.
- Mr. Metzler:** So he turned you down and you had to settle for a bronze star?
- Mr. Johnson:** Right.
- Mr. Metzler:** Because that doesn't require your commanding general to give it?
- Mr. Johnson:** To give it, right.
- Mr. Metzler:** I see. Well and you still have that bronze star?
- Mr. Johnson:** Oh yes.
- Mr. Metzler:** OK. That's an interesting story. So was that the last time you ever saw, or heard, of General Almond?
- Mr. Johnson:** No. General Almond, during the Korean War, he was Chief of Staff for, I think it was Eisenhower, who was the head in Korea.

- Mr.. Metzler:** May have been Mac Arthur.
- Mr. Johnson:** Macarthur, that's right. Mac Arthur. Well he was Macarthur's Chief of Staff.
- Mr.. Metzler:** Well he must have impressed somebody to get up that high.
- Mr. Johnson:** Well his wife was married to Chief of Staff in Washington.
- Mr. Metzler:** It pays to have connections. Those were really interesting stories about World War Two. What else can you, what comes to your mind about that whole Italian campaign that you want to share with me today? Did you ever see General Patton?
- Mr. Johnson:** Yes. I think Patton was the commander of North Africa and the European area (?). In Sicily, and he Patton is the one that sent for me, and my commander said, "Shall I relieve him of command?" He said, "No. I just want to congratulate him. He did something that should have been done along time ago. Kick your damn ass."
- Mr. Metzler:** That was Mark Clark, right?
- Mr. Johnson:** Mark Clark, right.
- Mr. Metzler:** So Almond must have reported to Mark Clark then, is that right?
- Mr. Johnson:** Yeah.
- Mr. Metzler:** So Mark Clark was, what, a three star?
- Mr. Johnson:** Yeah he was a three star.
- Mr. Metzler:** Mark Clark is pretty darn famous, everybody's heard of him. But nobody's heard of General Almond. He spelled that, A-L-M-O-N-D?
- Mr. Metzler:** Just like the Almond nut, huh?
- Mr. Johnson:** How bout that?
- Mr. Metzler:** When the war was over, did you stay in Italy, or were you released to come back to the United States, or what happened?
- Mr. Johnson:** World War Two? I came back to the United States.
- Mr. Metzler:** Were you in Italy when the armistice was signed and the war was over, or do you remember?

- Mr. Johnson:** Let's see. The armistice was signed, we were in Italy, but the Japanese were still fighting. What they were doing was, it was a question as to whether they would give us, when we reached American soil, was they would give us thirty days leave to go home, or rush us overseas.
- Mr. Metzler:** Back to the Pacific?
- Mr. Johnson:** Right. It was then that the, Truman said drop the bomb and they dropped the bomb and when they dropped the bomb the Japanese surrendered. Now they, oh, they was on-line at the time Negro soldiers from the.....oh, there were two from the military.....oh, at first, they used the Negro soldiers to guard the railroads and, in New York, and in the States, but they took the ten captains and sent them to the 92<sup>nd</sup> Division.
- Mr. Metzler:** To guard the railroads?
- Mr. Johnson:** Yeah. Guard the railroads and ports in New York and New Jersey on that. But they needed ten captains to fill out Almond's shipment overseas, for overseas. They sent him ten captains that were all Negroes and those were the ones sitting out there for two days.
- Mr. Metzler:** So you must have been in the reserve officer training corps when you were in college?
- Mr. Johnson:** Yes.
- Mr. Metzler:** And that's how you became, you got your Second Lieutenant?
- Mr. Johnson:** Yes. Right. Right.
- Mr. Metzler:** Now where did you go to college again?
- Mr. Johnson:** Howard University, Washington D.C.
- Mr. Metzler:** Howard University. That's a well-known university. Was it hard to get into that University?
- Mr. Johnson:** Well yes. You had to have high scores in high school.
- Mr. Metzler:** How high?
- Mr. Johnson:** I was, I think I was third in my class.

- Mr. Metzler:** You were right at the top.
- Mr. Johnson:** Yes.
- Mr. Metzler:** High school. Where did you go to high school?
- Mr. Johnson:** Hoatsville (?) high school.
- Mr. Metzler:** That's in Pennsylvania?
- Mr. Johnson:** Yes.
- Mr. Metzler:** Is that in the coal mining area?
- Mr. Johnson:** Yes.
- Mr. Metzler:** So you got your degree at Howard, an undergraduate degree.....
- Mr. Johnson:** Yes.
- Mr. Metzler:** And then, did what, went on to get your law degree?
- Mr. Johnson:** Yes.
- Mr. Metzler:** So was the law school a lot harder than undergraduate?
- Mr. Johnson:** there was thirty-five in my law class and only fifteen graduated. So that's....
- Mr. Metzler:** So they weeded out a few, didn't they?
- Mr. Johnson:** Yes, yes.
- Mr. Metzler:** But if you got a degree, a law degree, from Howard that is pretty prestigious.
- Mr. Johnson:** Yes.
- Mr. Metzler:** did you, then go immediately and, go take the bar exam, or did you, or what else did you do?
- Mr. Johnson:** I took the bar exam but you didn't get the results from it until the following spring and you took the bar exam in November, but you don't get it until sometime in April, or June. When I got the results I was already overseas and couldn't be admitted until I came back to Washington D.C.
- Mr. Metzler:** So you were already headed over to the Mediterranean?

- Mr. Johnson:** Yes.
- Mr. Metzler:** Now when was it you worked at the White House as a butler?
- Mr. Johnson:** During my last year in law school, my last semester in law school, I was FDR's swimming instructor. They said he couldn't swim unless he had lifeguards. It was during my two years before I went to law school, that I was his swimming instructor. Not in swimming; lifeguard. I got two hours per day, which took in my traveling and twenty minutes he had to swim in the water. He had to have a lifeguard there.
- Mr. Metzler:** And this was the pool at the White House?
- Mr. Johnson:** That's right, because he had had polio and, I'll bet he couldn't swim very well at all.
- Mr. Johnson:** Well, no. But he could use his hands and arms, but they said he had to have a lifeguard there, at the time.
- Mr. Metzler:** Did you get to talk to him at all?
- Mr. Johnson:** Not at that particular time. Later on, when I entered law school.....when I graduated from law school, and I entered the White House full time. I was his butler. Personal butler.
- Mr. Metzler:** Tell me about that. That sounds really interesting.
- Mr. Johnson:** There was a woman there that was the housekeeper. Here name was Mrs.> Nesbit. (?) She found out that these other guys, when they rode him down to Tierra vault (?) everybody was getting up. While they were getting up, he would shift from wheel chair to the table. These other guys, when he pulled down on their arm, they'd collapse (?) and he said, "Get that son-of-a-bitch out of here. I don't want him." (laughs) Clark Gable and I tried at 212 pounds.
- Mr. Metzler:** So you all both hold the record?
- Mr. Johnson:** Yeah.
- Mr.. Metzler:** That's an awful lot of weight to be lifting with one arm.
- Mr. Johnson:** Yeah, yeah. When Roosevelt pulled on my arm, I just tightened it and held on and he said, "That's the guy I want."
- Mr. Metzler:** So that's how you got the job?



- Mr. Johnson:** Yeah, yeah.
- Mr. Metzler:** That's so interesting. So tell me what it was like working for Mrs. Nesbit at the White House and seeing the President of the United States?
- Mr. Johnson:** Well, Mrs. Nesbit didn't have too much control over me because I was the president's butler. One time, I spilled soup in the president's lap, but it was not my fault. He was trying to impress Joe....darn it, the guy that had two sons and they were Mafia (?) heads, (?) and he was trying to impress this guy....
- Mr. Metzler:** S he was having a meeting with this guy?
- Mr. Johnson:** Yeah, having a meeting with this particular guy...
- Mr. Metzler:** And you were serving him soup.
- Mr. Johnson:** I was serving him soup, yeah. And what you do is take one bowl up and two, you take one bowl up and you tilt it and runs right down to you hands and you stop it and put that down. Well, he knew about what I was doing, see, and when I tilted it he knocked, he personally knocked it over. FDR did. But he was talking to this guy and the soup fell over in his lap and he didn't stop anything while the guy was mopping up, the head butler was mopping it up with towels and he was talking to this guy, never changed his tone, never changed his....and the guy said, "Anybody that's that concerned, I'll go along with every proposal." (?)
- Mr. Metzler:** So that's how FDR managed to impress this guy, 'cause he took that soup in the lap and didn't blink and eye.
- Mr. Johnson:** Didn't blink and eye, that's correct.
- Mr. Metzler:** And you think FDR did that intentionally?
- Mr. Johnson:** Yeah he did it intentionally. The next, Mrs. Nesbit said, "I'll have to replace Johnson because if his danger to the president in that, they told me, (?) but the head butler on that deal. And he said, "Well I tell you what I'll do. I'll let him clean silver in the pantry till he's replaced. So they put me back in the pantry. When it comes time to for Roosevelt to eat in his private study, he said, "Where's my butler?" He said, "You better have him here in five minutes or all of you damn people are fired."
- Mr. Metzler:** He said that?
- Mr. Johnson;** Yeah. And they ran out there, well Mrs. Nesbit was trying, both trying, the other guy was trying, the other guy was putting on my suit, my coat....

- Mr. Metzler:** Suddenly, you were popular again. So FDR, he was, you were his favorite butler.
- Mr. Johnson:** Yeah. When World War Two came on.....oh, there was a family, was it Fort Macarthur? When World War Two came on, I was the first White House employee to enter the Armed Forces. Mrs. Nesbit wailed because she was getting three twenty-five and month salary and I would be getting, instead of forty dollars a month, I was getting, at the White House was getting three seventy-five and I would be getting more than she was getting. That's what she wailed about.
- Mr. Metzler:** How interesting. What about Mrs. Roosevelt? Did you ever have any interaction with Eleanor Roosevelt?
- Mr. Johnson:** Yes. Eleanor Roosevelt, I served Mrs. Roosevelt, I served Margarite Lenand (?) breakfast in bed and I served Mrs. Roosevelt tea.
- Mr. Metzler:** Really. So she liked to take her tea in the afternoon?
- Mr. Johnson:** Yes, about four o'clock. At that time, in law school, studying for the bar, she set aside a room for me...she used to make her own tea and everything else, nut she set aside a room for me to give that two hours to study in that deal. The head butler wanted me to come back and sere him, but she said, "No. He deserves to stay there so he couldn't do nothing about that. So she set that aside and that was two hours I had to study.
- Mr. Metzler:** Mrs. Roosevelt was a very nice person. So she managed to get you two hours of free time so you could stay up with your studies. How interesting.
- Unknown female voice:** They worked twelve-hour days in the White House during those years.
- Mr. Metzler:** My gosh. You worked twelve-hour days in the White House?
- Mr. Johnson:** Yes.
- Mr. Metzler:** So you did that and studied for the bar exam, all at the same time?
- Mr. Johnson:** Yes
- Mr. Metzler:** My gosh, you were a busy man. What about.... I heard a story about a janitor, in the White House, who kept putting ladders up in the way while he was changing light bulbs and stuff like that and I t dept getting in the way of you guys who were working as butlers and one time you got kind of angry and tossed that ladder aside. Can you tell me about that story?

- Mr. Johnson:** Yes. They had a dumb waiter, that you would draw food up and down, but when the president, when you serve the president, you don't wait for a dumb waiter, I run down and get it and bring it up to him. Do it fast. This guy would set his ladder up down there and go somewhere.
- Mr. Metzler:** Why?
- Mr. Johnson:** Well, he was supposed to change light bulbs and things, but he would set his ladder there and disappear. I was running down there fast to get something to the president and this ladder was in the way and I get mad and smashed the ladder up. Put it up against the wall and threw it down, got the (unintelligible) and went back upstairs and they guy came there and his eyes were all busted up and....
- Mr. Metzler:** What did he do?
- Mr. Johnson:** I think he was....I don't know whether they fired him, or made him change his act, because he had no business leaving that ladder in the way of the steps up and down. He didn't come back.
- Mr. Metzler:** Do you remember the day the FDR died? I know that was a very sad day, April 12, 1945. That would have happened, I guess, when you were in Italy.
- Mr. Johnson:** It did, but I didn't know about it. I mean, I wasn't at the White House.
- Mr. Metzler:** I know. You were in Italy at the time.
- Mr. Johnson:** At the time. It was, when I came back it was Truman there. But, Truman was a captured (?) off Italy(?) in World War One. He could convert, relate to me better than he could with those five star generals and all. He, I think there were several, certain guy that he thought he was court martialed and given a life sentence, or something, and I got Truman to pardon him for me.
- Mr. Metzler:** That was, after, in between, World War Two and the Korean War?
- Mr. Johnson:** That's correct.
- Mr. Metzler:** When you think back on the whole period of World War Two, when you were in the Army, what was the most emotional time for you? When was it the most, were you under most emotional stress? Any particular time come to mind? When was it the toughest?
- Mr. Johnson:** I don't think I was, I was pretty well trained to take care of most of it.
- Mr.. Metzler:** You just stayed steady through the whole thing.

- Mr. Johnson:** Well those are, certainly, some good stories that you shared with me today. I want to thank you for doing that. You had a really exciting period on your life during that period, both in the White House and then in Italy. And General Almond, we don't know.....all we know is he became Chief of Staff. I guess the good guys, it isn't always good guys that make it to the top, is it?
- Mr. Johnson:** No.
- Mr. Metzler:** Is there anything else that you would like to talk me about, today, about that period of your life, while we have the time?
- Mr. Johnson:** Not that I can think of. We always (unintelligible) (laughs)
- Mr. Metzler:** That's like saying Kerrville is on the outskirts of Mason. That's a good story. Where did you get that t story about Philadelphia being on the outskirts of Hoatsville? (?)
- Mr. Johnson:** That's what we used to say.
- Mr. Metzler:** Well that's a good way to end this interview. Thank you for spending the time to describe some of your experiences with me. I really do appreciate that. Maybe we can get together time and perhaps I could hear some more of your stories and your experiences because it's impossible to remember them all at one, just all at one time. So thank you again Colonel Johnson for doing that. I appreciate it.
- Mr. Johnson:** I was my pleasure. ....(TAPE ENDS)

Transcribed by:

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