

Washington Island Military Archives

Donald Alfred Johnson

Born 5/31/1923

Died:

Period of Service: WW II
Navy

Sources: *B10 Service
questionnaire, JG, Am Legion
scrapbook – box 17*

Service # 959-01-50

Enlisted Jan 15, 1944 ASN 36297193. CPM 417th Infantry Camp McCoy, Wis.
Discharged 4/22/1946 Great Lakes Bupers Manual ART D – 9104

Trained at Great Lakes as gunnery mate second class.

Stationed at Great Lakes, Norfolk, VA, and aboard *LST 893*.

Battles include Asiatic-Pacific. Also served in European theater.

He was wounded in his side in Belgium and spent time in a hospital in France.

His medals include Victory, American Theater, Asiatic-Pacific.

Dave McCormick married his sister. (JG)

VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT
Preserving Stories of Service for Future Generations

Interview with

Donald A. Johnson

Conducted by John Gay

October 3, 2014

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We're at Don Johnson's home on Old West Harbor Road on Washington Island, Wisconsin on October 3, 2014. Don is going to tell us about his experiences in the military and what he has done since then. Don is 91 years old?

Yeah.

Okay, very good. Don, can you bring us up to date on what you did going into the military and in the military?

Just talk?

Yeah, just talk. I think they'll get it all picked up.

I was a senior in high school when Pearl Harbor happened, and I graduated in January just after that. And I was a commercial fisherman, so I didn't go into the service right away but in '43 I did volunteer to join the Navy. I joined the Navy and I went to Great Lakes Naval Training Station for my boot camp. And from boots I went to...

How long was that, how long did you spend in boot camp? Was it about eight weeks?

Oh no it was about 16 weeks, and then I went to gunnery school there in Great Lakes for 12 weeks and from there I went to Dearborn, Michigan, for four more weeks of gunnery school.

Where was that?

In gunnery school.

No, I mean where in Michigan?

Dearborn, Michigan

Oh, Dearborn, ok.

So then from there I was transferred into a crew for an LST and we went around to Norfolk, Virginia, to pick up our crew. And then from there when we had our crew we went to Pittsburg and picked up a new LST and took her down to New Orleans and we went around to the west coast.

How did you get around the west coast?

Went down through Panama Canal around to the west coast and from there we picked up a load of ammunition to take to Pearl Harbor, to Hawaii.

Was that a difficult trip?

No, not really. I was a commercial fisherman so the weather didn't bother me at all. But when we first left California the seas were just tremendous, and I think there was only about three of us that didn't get seasick.

How many were on that boat?

There was 104 or something like that in that area. She was 300 feet, a little over 300 feet long. So then we went to Hawaii and then we went back to California again and got another load of ammunition and took it back.

Was this an assortment of ammunition?

I don't know what kind it was to tell you the truth.

I'll tell you something, my granddaughter just married a boy from Hawaii whose father was there when Pearl Harbor happened. And he was a kid about your age, 17 or 18 and he was working for the army in a little volcano crater where they had hollowed out areas for the ammunition and he was handling the ammunition that you guys were bringing over. So go ahead, I didn't mean to interrupt.

So then from there we went to Enewetak, Marshal Islands.

What was that like?

That was terrible. It was just flat land there and I didn't even get out of the ship because I'm a redhead, fair haired so the guys went in the beer garden and I just stayed on the ship and sat in the shade. It was about 114 degrees there you know and no shade.

When I was in the army Don, I was stationed out of Fort Chaffee, Arkansas, and I wanted to get out of there in the worst way. My friend at headquarters, I told him, I said, anything that comes up to get me out of here let me know, so he called down to the office where I was working and the guy wasn't too sharp, and he said "who wants to go to Wichita," and I said "I'll go to Wichita," and I got on the phone and my friend said "Gay, what the heck's the matter with you, why do you want to go to Enewetak." I said, "Enewetak, I thought I was going to Wichita, I said I'll cancel."

(Laughing) Yeah, you were lucky, you got to cancel, 'cause there was nothing there. There was this homemade shade was the only shade. There wasn't a tree on there...

That's where they did all the atomic bomb testing, wasn't it?

I'm sure it was. From there we went to Saipan and Guam with the ship and never saw any action. Those areas were secured by then. We ended up in the Philippines in Leyte Bay there. We congregated with thousands of ships...

Is that right?

...waiting for the invasion of Japan. And while we were there, the war ended. So then we went up to Japan about a week later and went in there for the occupation.

What part did you go in?

I don't even remember the town...I couldn't pronounce it if I did. We were there a couple of weeks probably, and then we headed back to the States to be decommissioned.

Did you get a chance to meet any of the Japanese while you were there?

Oh, sure, yeah, in fact, they had souvenirs for us, and everything. We got swords and guns...and things the grandkids just love. In fact, one grandson, Scott, has both of them, so that was good. Anyhow, when we got back to the States I didn't have enough points to get discharged, so I was sent back home under delayed orders. So when I had enough points, I went back to the Great Lakes and was discharged in May.

You came back to the Island?

No, in Waukegan. We lived in Waukegan at the time. We were commercial fishermen there.

How long between the time you came back and they finally discharged you?

About a month and then I went in and I was there for Easter Sunday and had turkey and everything and I was glad I wasn't discharged yet, so the next day I was discharged. That was April 22nd, 1946.

So you got the turkey before you were discharged?

Yeah, they served me a meal before I was discharged... (Laughing) it's like before you get the electric chair, you get the meal before.

Did you have any experiences in the service that were kind of interesting?

Well, I never really did see any action. We were aboard a ship...we had a captain on it who made sure we didn't get any action. I don't know if that's true, but that's what we always thought. I had one great experience when we were at Guam...we pulled up to the beach at Guam, and an LCM pulled alongside of us. That was a smaller landing craft. And the fellow on there I went to high school with.

Is that right?

And he ended up being my best man when I got married.

Is that right? From the island here?

No, from Waukegan. We were both from Waukegan at that time...fishing and all that.

Were you born on the island, or down there?

No, I wasn't...my brother was and my dad was and Daryl was, of course. No, I was born in Chicago actually. But my dad went away, off the island, to make a living because he couldn't make a living on the island.

Yes, that was tough...

He met my mother and they started their life down there. They came back and forth to the island all the time.

Did Al Shellswick have his place down there then?

Oh, yeah, in fact in Waukegan, my dad and uncle had this boat built and we were going to go to Grand Marais, Michigan with her, and Al says ...and my dad were good friends, and they grew up as young boys...and he says, "Come to Waukegan, we're doing just great here." And so we didn't have a net shed yet or anything, but he had two of them and he let us have one of them until one became available, and we got our own then.

That was down in Waukegan then?

Yeah, in Waukegan. So I went to Waukegan high school.

And you were born in 19..?

1923.

What day?

May 31st.

May 31st, 1923...I've got to remember to put that down so we'll have it on record.

Yes, still around.

Very good. Well, I just had a birthday two days ago. Daryl...kept you from the carbohydrates and all that.

She feeds me right.

That's good. So, you spent roughly three years in service?

Yeah, about 2-1/2 to 3 years...right around there. Went right back to commercial fishing after that.

Out of Waukegan or...?

In Waukegan, to start, yes.

And then did you finally come up here?

Then we finally came up here to fish, but we hit it at a bad time, so we went back again and then we opened a fish store.

Where was the fish store?

In Des Plaines, Illinois, and my son still has it. A very successful business.

Great!

He's made it very successful.

Now Ted Hansen had one up there on Howard Street?

Yes, he's on Howard Street, he's got a good store, too.

And Al Shellswick had a place down there on Navy Pier?

Well that was kind of a story. He had one of the five fish stores on Navy Pier before the war. War broke out, they all had to leave. So he moved over to Grand Avenue and opened up this store, he was the closest one to the pier. Well he just went crazy, that place was just unbelievable. And my brother when we came up here my brother and I had to fish and it was so lousy. He went back and worked there for Al and I stayed here and picked cherries Daryl and I were just married. And I worked with her dad at the dairy for a while. He had an Island Dairy.

That was a cheese factory at the time?

Yeah.

So you came back to the island, about when was that?

Well when we got married then and went down there and had the store and everything then we retired at the end of '83. And that's when we came to the Island. Took a couple of trips to Florida and west coast and that. We settled in to the Island. We just liked the Island. I married an Island girl so I couldn't miss. My goal was always to get back to the Island and be an Islander. I have an Island fishing license and driver's license.

Have you been here in this house since '83?

Well we started building it in '80. She stayed here a couple of summers when it was partially built.

And you retired by then?

When she was staying here I was still working. That was around '80 and '81 and I retired at the end of '83.

So you've been here ever since. So that's 31 years?

Yep. Pretty nice retirement.

It's a good place to retire.

You've been here a long time too.

Well we first came in '62; we stayed over at the little brown cottage at Shellswick's. That was the first year it had been opened. I think we were the first or second people that were there. We had seven kids and so it was a good place because we could fit them all in. And Liam had just inherited Al's property at that time and he was having difficulty with the taxes. And so he offered me some property. 80 acres along Woodland and it was a thousand dollars for heaven's sake and I didn't have a thousand dollars so I said I can't do it Leon and the next year we came back and he said well Al Algoma Lumber bought 40 of those acres but I'll let you have the other 40 for \$750. And I said I haven't got \$750 either but I'm going to buy it anyways. So my brother in law and I bought it and then Leon said well Algoma is going to come up and take some logs off their 40, do you want me to have him to take some off your too and I said yeah, he said I'll watch it so they don't destroy the place. And I said ok and so they took 73 trees down and gave me \$10 a piece for them so the whole thing cost me \$50 and the taxes were \$19 for heaven's sake. It was fantastic so we camped there, the kids and I. Dorothy didn't relish that too much. The kids and I camped there, some of their friends, for a number of years. And finally, Dorothy and some of the girls were not interested in that anymore, Dorothy had never have been, so we bought a lot on Green Bay Road and put one of Julian's old log homes up on it. And we enjoyed that.

Great place to retire, isn't it?

Yeah, it really is. I'm very happy with it.

Cheryl, our daughter, just retired here now too.

Oh is that right?

Cheryl: Yeah, I'm on Little Lake Road; we bought it back in the 80's. But can I just interrupt? Did you tell him what your job was on the ship?

I got to get a lot of that stuff out of him yet.

Cheryl: Yeah, I just didn't want to be ending the conversation.

I got to stick here for a little while and pluck his brain a little more. So what did you do?

I was a gunner's mate. And most people maybe think a gunner mate shoots the gun. Well the gunner mate doesn't. He maintains the guns. And I was second class gunner's mate of all the LSTs.

You had to take care of when it jammed?

We didn't have any huge guns like the battleship cruisers and that we just had 40 millimeter and 20 millimeter, .50 caliber. But I maintained them guns. I was in charge of all of it. I had about six guns I was in charge of.

Where they all clustered or did you have to run around to them?

No, actually there was a pair in the bow, a pair in the stern and then two 40 millimeter, then several 20 millimeters scattered around.

So you took care of all of the guns on the ship?

No, no. There was about four of us and another second class gunners mate. He maintained the bow ones and I maintained the stern ones. Between the two of us and we had help from the other guys.

Was the ammunition stored under deck?

Oh yeah.

And then who brings it up? Do you have to get it up there or does somebody else bring it up?

There was no elevators that I recall or anything I think they just brought it up by hand, yeah.

Under heavy fire that would be a terrible, hard thing to do.

Well these ships weren't built to be war ships, they were just landing crafts. The first ones that they built they didn't even plan to take them off the beach. Once they went up they left them. But then they started dropping an anchor as you're going up and the anchor helped pull you off again and then they started saving them. But the first ones they didn't think to do that.

Just leave them there on the beach.

I wasn't on any of them though, (laughter).

And so they held about 100 men or so?

I forget what exactly, about 100 or a little over 100, yeah.

What was the crew? The crew was how many?

That's what I meant, the crew 100 or so. But the size of the ship was 300 and something.

So you could bring a couple hundred people more on?

Oh yeah. We could load it up with marines and soldiers for landing and big, heavy equipment and everything. She was called a landing ship tank, so we could haul tanks and everything. And a real big tank deck inside that go up the ramp. A lot of heavy equipment that they brought over were the landings those days.

Was one of our guys involved in Normandy and ran an LST or something like that? Was that Charles Gislaussen, or was he the one that ran one of those ships?

Well, they used a lot of them at Normandy, too. She got to be a popular ship. She was a big reason for the war being over when it was.

So you took them across from San Francisco to Hawaii, then across the Pacific to the Philippines? Was it kind of a bouncy kind of ship because of the length of it?

Was it what?

Was it kind of bouncy?

She was not framed like a regular boat was framed. She was framed lengthwise because when she hit the beach she could bend, and when you were in a head sea...she only went 10 miles an hour down wind, it was slow, so when we had a head sea you would hit one and the whole ship would go like this (gesturing) and this guy was on the bow on the telephone and when we hit one he would say "railroad crossing" and the ship would do this all the way back to the stern because that was the way she way built. But she was built like that so she could go up and not break.

So, it took you a long time to get over to Hawaii and a longer time to get to the Philippines.

Yes, it took us a month to get back to the States after the war.

Now, did you have a convoy going over with you?

Yes.

A whole bunch of ships? Quite a few LST's in the convoy?

Oh, yeah. (In the background – Cheryl) Do you know your LST number? 893.

893? O.K. We'll get that recorded.

I even know my serial number.

Well, that's good. We'll get that out of you one of these days. When we transcribe it we'll have you put that in, o.k.?

Sure.

Then, when you got to the Philippines, were you there long?

As I recall we were in Leyte. We got to go ashore a couple of times...just a short period of hours, you know...but it was a waiting game, and when they dropped the bomb...we didn't even know about that...all we knew was they said the war was over. I remember our boatswain mate, he couldn't believe it, it can't be over yet. Boy, I tell you there was some celebrating, fourth of July, shooting off flares and everything. It was very exciting, because I would guess there was 1,000 ships in there waiting for that invasion.

Wow, and people try and rewrite history, saying we shouldn't have bombed Japan, but then you talk to anyone who was waiting to go over there, they were happy because they felt that the Okinawa was and Iwo Jima, that they'd lose an awful lot of people just trying to get into Japan.

They estimated about a million people would have been killed in the invasion, between us and them, and like I told the kids, they might not be here today, because that LST is a big, easy target.

And it doesn't go very fast, does it?

You can't get out of the way...get out of its own way. It wasn't built for that.

Just to drop people off. So in the Philippines, you were there just a few days, or...?

Probably, I would guess a week or so, maybe; that's a couple of years ago to remember.

Yeah, I know what you mean. So you got to Japan then, and you landed and were there...

I don't know what the heck we were there for, to tell you the truth. Just to make a statement, I guess. It was about a week after the war.

I talked to a couple of guys who said they were in Japan after the bomb was dropped and the Japanese were very pleasant and accommodating.

Oh, yes, it was if they were almost like they were glad to see us. Maybe they weren't glad to see us, but they made it look like it anyway. But I kind of enjoyed being in the service, but I was very glad to get out.

Most people were. A lot of guys kept up with some of their mates.

I know, I did a couple, but Daryl's friends on the Island were more important to me.

Yeah, right. But did you feel the service taught you anything?

I'm sure it did. Discipline, especially.

What do you think about not having a draft anymore?

I don't know. I never even thought about it, to tell you the truth. If you have to, you have to, but, hopefully we don't. But the way things look, gee, it's terrible.

Well, at least the guys who were subject to the draft had an interest in how things were going, ... What rank did you attain...gunnery second class? Is that right?

Yes, second class gunnery.

What did they pay you for all that?

Well, it was \$50 when I went in, then when I got first class seaman, I got \$54. And when I got my first stripe it was around \$60, and the second stripe was around \$60-something. Then when I was away from the States I got about 20% more. So, I was making a little less than \$70 a month. I was a pretty greedy guy; I saved a lot of money.

Good for you. Well, I was in Korea and I think I was making \$80 a month.

Well, it wasn't much more.

And they were getting ready to let people go at that time, so I never did get anything more than \$84 or something like that. But, \$80, that kept you in beer and cigarettes at that time.

Oh, yeah. Like aboard ship it was a nickel a pack for a pack of cigarettes. Yeah, 50 cents a carton.

Now it's 50 cents a cigarette! So, you got out in 1946, April. And you were discharged at Great Lakes and then back home, here?

At Waukegan. From Great Lakes I could just take a streetcar home. Waukegan is just right alongside Great Lakes and the streetcar would pick me up right outside the entrance of Great Lakes and it let me off about 50 feet from my house.

Did you know Mathon Karitsus? He was a commercial fisherman out of Waukegan. He had a restaurant...

Oh, Mathon, oh, sure, I knew Mathon real well.

He always used to predict the winter by how deep the fish were.

The perch...yeah, he was so full of it.

He wasn't very accurate, but it made good copy anyway for the paper.

Oh, he had a lot of free publicity for it.

We had air cleaners at his place. That was the business I had at the time, and so we would go up there and clean the air cleaners once a month, but I remember him up there.

I'd like to tell a story about it, it's a different story.

O.K., go ahead.

...He was in partnership with a guy named...his nickname was Spider, I forget what his real name was...anyway, Spider ran the boat and Mathon took care of the shore work. On Mondays in Waukegan a lot of them never showed up for work...hangovers, you know...so Spider says to Mathon, "you've got to go on the Lake with us". "Oh, I can't go, I get seasick". "I don't care if you get seasick, you've got to go". So he gets Mathon on the boat and they're going out of there and they only get as far as the can buoy, which is about a mile, and he's getting sick. "I've got to go in; I've got to go in, Spider. I'll give you my watch if you take me in." So Spider took his watch and took him in.

Well, Mathon never told that to the newspapers.

No way. No, he was a great seaman as far as the newspaper was concerned. (Cheryl) He always wore a captain's hat, right?

So, you went back to commercial fishing in Waukegan and were there for a while.

Yeah, until we gave up on that due to too many regulations and we were bothered with different stuff. Yeah, the lamprey eel killed off all the trout, so that was a big part of our business. Fishing for lake trout, so when they were gone it was just fishing for chubs. The ones that you smoked, you know? And then they disappeared. But then the Alewife, they got into the Lake and they...

But the salmon didn't take care of them?

Well, you got so many in the net it was so hard to get them out.

Yeah, well they used to pile up at the south end of the Lake and they had to bulldoze the piles.

Yeah, things like that. So when this store came available, we took it.

That was in Des Plaines, was it?

No, no, no, it was in Chicago. Later on, we stayed eight years in Chicago? Anyhow, it was quite a while. (Wife) How old were you when we went to Des Plaines? It was five years and you left George and we bought the other store. So you were partners for a few years with your brother and then our 4 children were getting older and it was decided we were going to open a fish store/restaurant combination. At the time he was in partnership and he felt it wouldn't be fair to his brother to have that totally different two stores. One a restaurant and one just a fish market. So then they split. The Chicago store wasn't doing that good anyway...the neighborhood had changed...so that was when he went out on his own.

In Des Plaines.

In Des Plaines, because our family was growing where they could all work with us and they were a big, big part of our business there, our children...Working after school, a couple of them went on a work program.

Oh, were they?

And a big thing for us.

Where was it in Des Plaines?

Well we started out on Rand Road, then we moved uptown. We had so many setbacks throughout our business career in the area like they widened the highway and took our parking away for one. And then that, I don't know if you remember the salmonella scare for smoked fish. We were building our business on smoked fish because Don had this huge smoke house built. That was a big business we were building...they took that away from us just like that.

Because of the regulations?

(Wife)Well, that salmonella scare...

(Don) Scared all the people away.

(Wife)

..the publicity on it did so much harm.

The smoking killed the salmonella, didn't it?

What happened was that this gentlemen took smoked fish to Florida in an unrefrigerated truck and sold it to people that got ill from it. Of course, it should never have happened, but because of that the publicity and they came and confiscated all our smoked fish and people were too scared to buy it anymore, so that was a big setback. So that's when we decided the only thing available was a restaurant combination fish store. So that's when we went into that which worked out ideal because our children were all at an age where they could work with us. And his Father would come and work with us, my Mother worked with us so we had a really family business, which helped our customers as well. They knew it was all family, and they seemed to like that.

Did you pay the kids or make them work...?

Oh no, he paid them just the same as he did any other employee. That's right, he did. He was very fair in that way.

We went to your place one time. I've got a sister-in-law in Des Plaines. She lives on Phoenix, and we were up there one time, and we went to the store, but I couldn't remember exactly where it was. Would that have been on...?

(Wife) It's on Northwest Highway now. See, because then when the children were all getting out of school and going on to college age that's when he decided that he wanted to go smaller. So we just went back to the fish store, as opposed to the restaurant. It's still eat-in, but it's not a regular restaurant, but there are tables where people can eat. It's that's on Northwest Highway just west of downtown.

Did you do any fishing up here...any commercial fishing?

(Don) Yes, we fished...somewhat, yeah.

Did you go out with Jake or somebody? Jake Ellefson?

No, just my Dad, my brother and I.

On your own boat?

Yeah.

What did you do, pack them up and send them down to Chicago and Milwaukee?

Yes, same way. Hansen's had the shed down on the dock where Kenny Koyen has his operation down there. The Hansen's used to own that. They owned the whole darn area there. He used to pack them and everything there, and then George Mann he used to sell them. Remember George Mann?

(Wife)When you say Hansen, that's Art Hansen.

Yeah, there's four different Hansen families there.

(Wife) Art and I forget his brother's name, two brothers.

(Don) Hans and Art.

What was your brother's name that you fished with?

George. My dad's name was George, my brother's name was George and so I was called George too of course. Until I got married, then I was called Daryl...

It was good to take your wife's name. You know where to go home then. Well that's neat. Well, Don I appreciate the time you've spent here. I hope that we can get a nice recording for you that you can take a look at.

Well, I hope it's worked out for you.

Well, we'll conclude then in just a moment.

You've got a lot of editing to do there.

We'll put it out just the way it is. Thanks again.