

WORLD WAR II *Remembered* LEADERS, BATTLES & HEROES



World War II Participants and Contemporaries

Capt. Charles Cousins "Sonny" Johnson, III
Fort Worth, Texas
Army Air Corps, Pacific Theater

World War II Remembered is a multi-year exhibition currently on display at the Eisenhower Presidential Museum. The article that follows is a special feature of this exhibition, the second in a series created to honor and educate about the generation that won World War II. Featured are the stories of real people from the "World War II Participants and Contemporaries" collection, held and preserved in the archives of the Eisenhower Presidential Library.

I waggled my wings and got our gang together. Then I saw the bombers. Right afterward I saw three sun-sitters—Zeros waiting for us to make our pass. But we went down, anyway.

I was pretty well placed for a sweep. First, I fired all over the end ship, then I spattered a second, then a third. If the Zeros had not been coming, I guess I could have had at least a dozen probables going right down the line, but with them attacking, I went over for a steep dive. Little pieces were coming off my first man, falling down like snow. I pushed the stick against the fire wall and dropped, then blacked out coming up. I fired at two Zero chasers, but probably without effect.

Then, suddenly, another Zero appeared ahead. I missed him by considerable margin, one way, then corrected and missed him the other way, but finally got him lined up just right. I got him in the belly. When fire broke out, the whole plane seemed to crumple like a paper bag you've crushed in your hands. It changed shape and color; you'd never think it had been a plane.

1st Lt. Charles C. Johnson, III
August 23, 1942
Darwin, Australia

At the time he was commissioned into the Air Corps of the Army of the United States, March 14, 1941, Second Lieutenant Sonny Johnson cut a dashing figure, seated in the cockpit of his BT-14. At age 21, Sonny was a ruggedly handsome, newly minted, second lieutenant, with blue-grey eyes and wavy light-brown hair. His parents must have been incredibly proud of their only child. He had graduated from high school with honors, earned a degree in aeronautical engineering, and had graduated in the upper echelon of his flying cadet class. An exceptionally gifted—and naturally competitive—new fighter pilot, Sonny intended to become the best of the best.

Charles Cousins Johnson, III, was born in Fort Worth, Texas, August 2, 1919, to Charles, Jr., "Charlie," and Hattie Mae Johnson. He grew up in a "cozy bungalow" at 4025 Bryce Ave., in the Arlington Heights neighborhood. There his boyhood years were filled with swimming, ice-skating, archery, and target practice. But, most of all, he loved building model airplanes. In 1936, Sonny graduated from W.C. Stripling High School, just days after his 17th birthday. As "Class Representative," he delivered an address entitled, "Our Schools of Today." Ranked first among senior honor students, he was awarded a scholarship to Texas Christian University. In 1938, he

transferred to North Texas Agricultural College (NTAC), graduating in 1940. In the summers, he worked as a motion-picture projectionist and an advertising assistant—his father’s profession.

In the spring of 1939, Sonny was one of 30 college students selected for the Civil Aeronautics Authority’s “Youth-in-Aviation” program. The following summer (1940), he was one of only seven chosen for the CAA’s advanced flight training. That September, he enlisted in the Army Air Corps’ “Flying Cadet” program, graduating in March 1941, commissioned a second lieutenant. His father had been an “officer” pilot and an Army Air Corps instructor at Kelly Field during the Great War.

Following graduation, Sonny was assigned to the 49th Pursuit Group. Just weeks after Pearl Harbor, the 49th was mobilized, boarding the USAAT *Mariposa* on January 14, 1942, bound for Melbourne, Australia. (The 49th Fighter Group eventually amassed an unmatched record of 668 aerial victories in the Pacific Theater in WW II.)

By mid-April, the unit was deployed to the Darwin area to prevent a threatened Japanese invasion. On

“He always did more than was expected of him, and would often work late at night after the normal duty hours. He is capable of getting a great deal of extra work from men serving under him by his leadership and the good example he sets for them.”

—Capt. Robert D. Van Auken

officer. Earlier that month, Sonny was promoted to first lieutenant and, on June 13, he was wounded in aerial combat, sustaining “severe” shrapnel wounds in his left arm and shoulder. With one functioning arm, and bleeding profusely, Sonny managed to land—and save—his Curtiss P-40E “Warhawk.” Following a hospital stay and convalescence, he

April 27, Sonny’s squadron was among those that intercepted, and turned back, an estimated 14-20 bombers and a fighter escort of 12 Zeros.

By mid-June, he had been in Australia for four months and was now a “flight leader” and engineering

was anxious to return to combat. On June 20, he was awarded the Purple Heart.

By the first week of July 1942, Sonny had resumed his duties. Engaged in combat over the Timor Sea on August 23, he led a flight group of P-40s, which intercepted a large formation of Japanese bombers and fighters. Downing a Zero and damaging several others, Sonny was awarded the Silver Star for “gallantry in action.” Shortly thereafter, he was promoted to captain. In early October, the headquarters of the 49th Fighter Group moved to Port Moresby, New Guinea. Here Sonny was wounded a second time in the defense of Port Moresby and was transferred to Hamilton Field Hospital, near San Francisco, in early November.

In mid-November 1942, at Hamilton Field, the 356th Fighter Squadron was created as a new unit of the 354th Fighter Group. Sonny was appointed Commanding Officer, charged with building and training the new squadron. Back home in Fort Worth, he had time to visit his doting—and much relieved—parents and his maternal grandparents, who lived in San Antonio. “Captain Johnson,” war hero and celebrity, delivered a number of talks to groups in both cities. One *Fort Worth Press* article, dated November 14, reported that when the young captain was asked how duck hunting compared to hunting Zeros, he had replied, “When you’re aiming at ducks ahead of you, you don’t have to turn around and look for ducks behind you.”

On December 20, Sonny was deemed qualified for “duty involving flight,” although he was back in the hospital by early January for observation and more tests, and was finally transferred to San Francisco’s Letterman General. Still there was no diagnosis. In the meantime, the new 356th squadron was sent on to the bombing and gunnery range at Tonopah, Nevada; Sonny would join them later that month. On February 6, 1943, Sonny climbed into the cockpit, as he had hundreds of times before, for a routine training flight in a new P-39L Airacobra. For reasons unknown, his airplane crashed to the ground—the first tragedy for the new squadron. World War II decorated fighter pilot, Captain Charles C. Johnson, III, died instantly.