

**WHAT DADDY  
(AND MOTHER)  
DID IN THE WAR**

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## INTRODUCTION

This project started as a result of watching too much public television. In early October of 2007 PBS ran a series by the documentary filmmaker Ken Burns. This series, “The War,” (or as pronounced by an old witness from Alabama who both looked and sounded like our dear Mammy, “the Waw”) ran for about eight days and chronicled people who actually lived through and fought during World War II. That is not so unusual. We’ve all seen war footage and heard veteran’s commentaries since the end of that war. What made it different was that for the first time we followed the same people throughout the war. Plus, we saw how it affected whole communities and the affects of the war on people’s entire lives.

Watching this series, my husband, Bill, and I had a couple of reactions. (1) This is fascinating stuff; (2) We can do that. What Ken Burns did was the same thing he does in all his films...take archival pictures and footage, get either eyewitness interviews or have people read actual accounts from the times he covering, and drag it out beyond belief. We were inspired.

Fortunately, at the end of each night’s episode there was a sort of a call to action. It seems that with all of the World War II veterans nearly gone, someone finally decided that it was a good idea to get the oral histories of the remaining vets and others who aided in the war effort. The Library of Congress started what became known as The Veterans History Project. Volunteers were needed to find remaining veterans and get their memories on tape. Right up our alley.

So Bill and I started making plans to do this. We decided to start in Marianna, my hometown and resting place of my father, Bob Johnson, a veteran of World War II and with years of service in the Aleutians.. We went over one day, looked up the current American Legion Post Commander, Jim Davis, and asked if we could use the Legion Hut to conduct interviews. We picked his brain for possible survivors that we might interview. We put an article in the *The Courier-Index* explaining what we were up to and asked for interested people to call and set up interview times. We were on our way to becoming documentarians for the Library of Congress.

Somewhere early in this process, it occurred to me that although I thought I had a pretty good understanding of where my own parents fit into the World War II era and what their roles were, there were definite gaps in my knowledge. Neither Mother nor Daddy talked much about those days. When they did, it had to be pried out of them. So I decided that if I was going to participate in this oral history project on other veterans, I would try to piece together my parents’ oral histories, as well.

This is not as easy as it sounds. When parents are gone and neither of them were great record-keepers, one has to rely on one’s own memory. Memory fades, your own as well as others. People, such as aunts, uncles, old friends of your parents have less reliable memories, move away, or die. The whole process was made more difficult because 80% of the Army veteran’s records from 1912 to 1960 were destroyed in a 1973 fire of the

building in St. Louis that housed all those records.

Try to imagine what kind of grief this fire and that oversight caused. For this small project it meant that there was no central records place to go to in order to track Bob Johnson's military service. There was no paper record that I could lay my hands on at the time of this writing that made it simple to say "Okay, here I see that he was in Ft. Bliss in 1941 starting in January" or "Yes, he did win the Purple Heart for frost-bitten feet." This would have to be done the hard way.

Thankfully, Daddy left a treasure trove of photographs that were taken during his military service. As far as I know, he never looked at the pictures after they were initially taken. They were preserved in an old scrapbook that his mother, Beadie Johnson, or my mother probably put together. The scrapbook contained valuable clues to his war years. This scrapbook wound up in my possession as one of my first choices when we divided up our inheritance. Mother left many pictures too, and I have her scrapbook. I decided that all of us should have copies of these pictures, at least on CD.

Later, I felt that the pictures and the information had to be put into some kind of context and labeled, if possible. But how could I accomplish that? The answer came in two incredible pieces of luck. One was a book, the other a phone call from Heaven.

The book, *The Williwaw War: The Arkansas National Guard in the Aleutians in World War II* by Donald M. Goldstein and Katherine V. Dillon, is THE definitive book on the campaign in the Aleutians, where Daddy served. Sandy Beauchamp told me about and praised this book as the top source to go to for facts on the subject. I located it at the Laman Library in North Little Rock, but was not allowed to check it out. Ultimately, I located a copy of the book to purchase online. It came from a used book store in, of all places, Russellville, Arkansas. This is not so surprising when you learn that a good portion of the 206<sup>th</sup> Coast Artillery, Daddy's unit, came straight out of Arkansas Tech University at Russellville. So this book gave me everything I needed to know about the history of the 206<sup>th</sup> from Marianna during the war.

The aforementioned phone call, as far as I am concerned, fits into the category of "Miracles." About 8:00 p.m. December 4 one Tuesday evening, about two weeks after the article on the Veterans History Project appeared in the Marianna paper, I received a call from a Dr. Bob Boon of Huntsville, Alabama. He identified himself and stated that he was "your father's hut mate all through the war and best man at your parents' wedding." I nearly fainted from shock. Although I had not heard that name in many years, the thought that ran my head was "Jackpot!" Who better to fill in those pesky gaps in history and provide color commentary for that portion of Daddy's life than one who knew him better than anyone else at that time? Also, from their time as pups in the Arkansas National Guard Band in Marianna to the time that they were on their way home at war's end Dad and Dr. Boon marched together in lockstep.

I kept Dr. Boon on the phone for more than an hour peppering him with questions which he untiringly answered. Since he was 86 years old at the time and his wife is a few years

younger, Dr. Boon told me that he would be unable to make any of the interviews in Marianna anytime soon. I stated then that I hoped we could get together sometime in the future so that I could get his story for the Veterans Project. The future was on that Friday, which coincidentally was December 7, the 66<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Pearl Harbor bombing. Bill and I decided that we could not let this opportunity pass by, so we packed and headed toward Huntsville.

On Friday morning December 7 2007 Dr. Boon, his wife Eloise, and their daughter Hannah met with us and graciously allowed us to take over their lovely home and monopolize their day, although they seemed to enjoy it as much as we did. Both Hannah and Mrs. Boon sat right with us as we interviewed Dr. Boon, rapt with attention the whole time.

After we finished with the formal interview, Dr. Boon brought out his own scrapbooks and let us all look at them. He possessed many of the same photos that Dad had in his scrapbooks, but there was enough variation in them to make it interesting. These served as a springboard to more memories and stories of the 206<sup>th</sup> Band. He also identified many of the people and places in the pictures that I had. Later, the Boons took us out for a lovely lunch. With everyone more relaxed, Dr. Boon gave us information that made me wish the camera was still rolling. Dr. Boon seemed to possess total recall about that era. Although he is a very different man than my own father, Bob Johnson, in terms of personality, I came away from our meeting feeling as if I had spent the morning with Daddy.

The general facts of the Marianna boys entry into the war and other insights were confirmed by Roy V. Williams, also of Huntsville and former Marianna resident and veteran. After spending the morning with the Boons, we spent another wonderful time that afternoon with Roy and his delightful wife, Madeline, an old friend and classmate of Mother's.

Armed with all of this sudden new knowledge, I felt compelled to get it all down on paper in some sort of coherent narrative, for all of us and for future generations. They will study World War II in school and we all should know what a vital part both of our parents played in that war, the outcome of which meant so much to civilization.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to everyone who shared memories, stories, and general knowledge: Aunt Lois Barnett Duke, Aunt Sue Holman, and Sandy Beauchamp, who spent a lifetime picking the brain of her father, Ralph. Robin, Camille, and Kim willingly shared what they could remember from the little that Mother and Daddy told us. Their enthusiasm for what we have learned has made it all seem worthwhile.

Our daughters, Erin and Paisley, were equally enthusiastic and not once suggested that we were crazy for doing any of this. Paisley even stated, "Finally, you all are doing what you were meant to do all along....original field research."

Dr. Bob, Eloise, and Hannah Boon offered hospitality, invaluable information, and friendship. Our family history project would have been shorter and less complete without them. I owe a great debt to Dr. Bob.

Mostly, credit goes to Bill, who did the heavy lifting as well as the encouraging of the project. He served as cameraman and sound man for the video. Bill also performed his specialty, which is combing the Internet for facts, figures, and minutiae, as if this project was important to more than just this family.

I am eternally grateful for and to Bob and Shirley Allen Johnson. They were good people and modest people. Neither of them were particularly shy, but they weren't boastful either. This is one of the reasons that we have so little information what they felt they had to do and did it well, without much complaint. They got through it mostly intact. Probably because both of them had been in information-sensitive areas and had been trained and warned not to talk freely, they were never comfortable telling all that they knew or experienced. Besides, they would say, so many other people had it so much worse.

But for Sgt. Bob Johnson and Civilian War Worker Shirley Allen, their survival skills and their eventual attraction to each other, none of us would be here. It is a story worth telling.

## WHAT DADDY (AND MOTHER) DID IN THE WAR

### BOB JOHNSON'S WAR

None of Bob Johnson's children have any idea what it's like to have a father who bragged about his war exploits. He just didn't talk about it. His service was longer than most other men who were in the war. He didn't seem to feel inferior to those who saw tremendous amounts of action. Nor did anyone who knew him treat him that way. Twice he was selected to serve as commander of his local American Legion post, the Julius Benham Post of Marianna, Arkansas. One of these times was in 1950, a mere four years after World War II.

But if Stephanie, Camille, Robin, or Kim asked him "What did you do in the war, Daddy?" he most often answered, "I played in the band" or more specifically, "I played the trombone."

He shouldn't have had to go to into the service at all. He was color blind, an automatic and permanent 4F classification. His children went through many years wondering why their father thought all shades of tan through pink were just "brown." Or why sometimes he studied both traffic lights and patterns before coming to a stop at an intersection. Finally, one day he mentioned to a roomful of us that he was color blind.

Now there was a conversation stopper! Stephanie, in particular, could not understand how he possibly could have been taken into the service if he were color blind. "Isn't that supposed to exempt you from service?"

He shook his head and said matter-of-factly, "They needed recruits. They held up a gun and said, 'Boy, do you see this gun?' I said I did, and that was their eye test."

The few times that Bob Johnson talked with his children about his military experiences, he did not sugar-coat anything. He did not particularly enjoy the experience, but he tried to make the best of it. When pressed, he would offer a snippet of information, such as how he admired the emergency military tactics of Regimental Commander Colonel, later to become General, Robertson. Or he'd distract the listener with a funny story, such as the one about Army buddy and fellow band member Van "Sugar Lump" Brown and the slop jar.

It seems that Sugar Lump joined the 206<sup>th</sup> Coast Artillery Band with the rest of the Marianna guys. Everyone liked Sugar Lump, but he had a knack for finding bad luck. Plus, he wasn't much of a musician. Sugar Lump was tried out on a variety of band instruments and found lacking on all of them. When asked what instrument Sugar Lump wound up playing, Dr. Robert Boon said in a derisive manner, "Cymbals!"

By the time the 206<sup>th</sup> Band was in Dutch Harbor, Unalaska the Sugar Lump problem was

solved by issuing him a clarinet, but no reed. Dad reported that frequently the band was required to march through the base before dawn, playing loudly in an effort to wake up the rest of the army. On one particular day as they marched by the barracks, an irritated soldier threw a nearly full chamber pot out the window in the direction of the band. Sugar Lump was the unfortunate clarinet-holder who took the brunt of it.

As Dad described the aftermath, he said that Sugar Lump came to him, crying. He said, “Dang it, Bobby! They hit me and I wadn’t even playing!” Gales of laughter by Daddy, Mother, and anyone in earshot would follow, no matter how many times the story was told. I was an adult before it occurred to me that this story was a defense mechanism for Dad. It was a story that deflected serious questions about the war, and it was a story that allowed him to laugh about the war, some of his experiences, and to feel a closeness to old army buddies who supplied friendship and protection during a trying time in their lives.

### **LONG AGO AND FAR AWAY: THE EARLY YEARS**

Bob Johnson was in college at Magnolia A&M before the war broke out. It was at the end of the Depression and he was a slightly older than the average underclassmen, having been born July 18, 1918 and having repeated three grades in school. He repeated first grade due to an accident that nearly killed him and left him with a head injury that took months to recover from.

In that accident, he was riding the school bus, more like a wagon, he said. His father, Floyd, was the bus driver. Bob was standing at the door of the bus when they hit a bump that bounced the door open and Bob out. The bus ran over his head. He was unconscious for several days, maybe more than a week. Everyone attributed his survival and eventual recovery to the fact that he was wearing a little cap that buffered the weight of the vehicle and caused the tire to slide off his head. Also, recent rains had left the road muddy and softer. Whatever the reason, he pulled out of it, but lost enough school time that he had to repeat first grade. And for the rest of his life, he hardly ever left home without a cap.

He lost another year when his family moved from Oak Forest to Marianna. Oak Forest was several classifications below the Marianna Schools. The Oak Forest school was undoubtedly a one-room schoolhouse. The transfer to the larger school meant an automatic repetition that allowed the transferring students to “catch up” to the Marianna students. However, as an aside, I never heard anything about his older sister, Willastein, having to repeat a grade, and she transferred right along with Bob.

The birth order of the family was Willastein, Bob, Lois, and baby sister, Floyd Estelle.

## **YOU'VE GOTTA BE A FOOTBALL HERO**

Bob Johnson was a wonderful athlete, small, but lightning fast and a quick thinker. He was a natural quarterback, although he usually played both offense and defense in Marianna games. His children heard of his athletic prowess throughout his life from people who saw him play. At his funeral in 1998 men from every walk of life in Lee County came up and talked about his exploits on the field or court, events that happened 50 years prior! Stephanie, Camille, and Robin's old high school principal had been a teacher when Bob was in school. Clyde Hogan told them, "The thing about Bob Johnson and sports was he didn't know when to quit. It made him dangerous." It seemed to be a characteristic that stayed with him.

His senior year in high school, Dad said, he had a great football year. Every year he played was a great year, but that one was exceptional. At 5'4" and 117 pounds, he was the smallest guy on the team, but still its quarterback. And he played on teams with several athletes who went on to play at Division I colleges. A couple of his teammates, Kay and Butler Eakin were stars at the University of Arkansas, and Kay went on to a career in the pros.

But Bob was a standout, so much so that late in his senior year the football coach suggested that if Bob returned to play another year, in the hope that he would grow, the coach could almost guarantee him a football scholarship to college. So on his graduation night, his parents, Floyd and Beadie, showed up at the ceremony to watch with pride their second child and only son step up and collect his diploma. Only he didn't. Later they discovered that he had deliberately flunked a course that made graduation impossible so that he could come back another year to play ball.

My grandmother, Beadie, told me once that it upset them so much that Floyd went to have a talk with the coach and threatened to withhold Bob from playing ball for him. Here it was the Depression and every kid still at home and not working or doing something else productive was a real drain on resources. Evidently Bob talked them into relenting because when fall arrived he was back on the football field, barking plays. He graduated that spring, a 20-year-old recent high school graduate, still 5'4", 117 pounds and too tiny to attract any college football coaches.

He apparently graduated in 1939. Stephanie has in her possession a 1939 T.A. Futrall High School Diploma with Bob Johnson's name on it. The Class Roll also contains the names of many people that Dad spoke of over the years as his boyhood friends: Bobby Boon, Maxcy Daggett, Dan Felton, Julia Jackson (Ju-Ju) Hughey, Margie Oxner Gardner, W. T. Webster, Dan Wood, and George Word.

Bob's sister, Willastein, and her husband, Jess Odom, were living in Magnolia, Arkansas at the time where Jess managed a West Department store. They invited Bob to move in



with them so that he could attend college at Magnolia A&M, now Southern State. Jess took Bob to visit the Muleriders' football coach for an interview and a try-out for the team. Jess was an ace salesman and did his best to sell the idea to the coach that this small young man could stay on the field with college athletes, even to lead them. Bob told Stephanie that "the coach just laughed. Then he told me and Jess that he couldn't in good conscience put me on the field because those big ole boys would kill me the first time they hit me."

Bob said that he coach must have seen his disappointment because he offered to let Bob be the equipment manager and to drive the bus. Bob accepted the job, since he would get paid for it. Undoubtedly, it was hard on him to wash jerseys for the players and cart them to games when he wanted so much to be on the field with them. He did put his athletic skills to use by joining the boxing team. He continued boxing in college and, I believe, in the Army right up until he lost a fight, by being knocked out cold. That ended that.

### **I LOVE A PARADE: Why the Guard?**

Though no one in the family can remember hearing Bob say exactly why or when he joined the National Guard, Dr. Robert H. "Bob" Boon of Huntsville, Alabama, now 86, does remember. Eyewitness Boon reported in a December 7, 2007 interview from his home in Huntsville, Alabama that most of the young men who joined in Lee County at that time did it for the money and for fun. The country was still in the grips of the Depression and the \$1 per drill that was offered looked pretty good. "We wanted to learn music and we got a check And we had fantasies about getting away from home."

In Marianna, Arkansas the National Guard unit was the 206<sup>th</sup> Coast Artillery. They trained once a month and kept their World War I vintage equipment ready in case foreign enemies marched up the St. Francis and L'Anguille Rivers looking for trouble.

A more basic mission was to assist the populace in case of natural disasters, which they were called upon to do in the Great Flood of 1937. The Guard went out to search for and bring to safety the many farm families who lived in the bottoms, the lands adjacent to the Mississippi and St. Francis Rivers and their tributaries. These rivers flooded nearly every year until the Army Corps of Engineers completed their levee and drainage projects. The '37 flood was particularly bad and people had to be evacuated to the football stadium and put up in tents for a while. The Guard supervised the operations and Bob took part in that. (Boon)

The Arkansas National Guard Yearbook of 1938 includes a formal regimental photograph of the 206<sup>th</sup> Coast Artillery. The photo includes the "men" of the 206<sup>th</sup>, many of whom people of my generation will remember. They are W. R. Jones (Maria and Billy Bob's

father), Ed Spaine (Sharon and Ned's father), Ralph and Harold Brainard, Robert Boon John Summerford, Cliff Williams (Carol and Pat's father), Irvin Carlow (Chris and Bill's father), Ralph Beauchamp (Sandy and Jack's dad), Courtney Langston (Lynn, Martha Marie, and Sam's dad), Cliff Harrington (Dusty and Georgia's dad) Luther McCarty (James, Patricia, Linda, and Donny's father), along with Robert T. Johnson .

These men became leaders of their community after the war, but in 1938 they were just babies. And they had no inkling that they were about to enter the world arena. At the time they were just looking for something to do.

Plus, Dr. Boon continued, in the case of the band, "The Guard provided the instruments for the band. We wound up being a sort of combination Guard band and community band. We'd march downtown and kids would run and squeal. People would gather. It was something to do." The band regiment was headquartered in Marianna, so they didn't have to find transportation to fulfill their responsibilities.

Bob Johnson was three years older than Bobby Boon, but due to his graduating later than he should have, it is likely that he was still a high school student when he enlisted. Robert Boon definitely remembers being in high school, and underage, when he joined.

The band was recruited by a band master called "the Professor" by the young men he trained. He was a man named Fred H. Kreyer and had a degree in music. According to Boon and Roy V. Williams, another member of the Guard Band, some of the band members "fudged" on their ages. One had to be 18 to join. Williams said that he was 17 and Boon barely 16 when they signed on, yet they said it wasn't a problem for them. Both were the company clerks at one time or another and could cover up the truth about their ages. (Williams)

So these recruits, our father included, signed on for "a lark." Boon stated further, "We thought we'd make a little money, and in case of war, we wouldn't have to do anything unpleasant, like be in the infantry."

The prospect of these young men being caught up in a world war didn't seem to be a possibility at the time. Boon reports that they completed their basic training in Pensacola, Florida in the summer, which for the band mostly consisted of getting better at playing their instruments. It also gave them the opportunity "to get away for the summer and carouse with our friends," Boon recalled. For those Guardsmen who wound up in the artillery units, they practiced shooting their World War I era artillery equipment which was wildly inaccurate, into the Gulf of Mexico.

The 206<sup>th</sup> Coast Artillery was notified in August of 1940 that they were being sent to Minnesota. for training before being sent for specialized training. Col. Robertson, their regimental commander gave all who were in college the option of getting out of the

Guard. But because the draft had been instituted and their Guard commitment was just one year, few took that option.. Several opted to stay rather than risk the draft. (Boon)

So these young fellows had, in all innocence, volunteered to protect their home counties and entertain them with military parades for one year. They were farm boys, clerks, craftsmen, and students. Here, it seems appropriate to paraphrase the *Gilligan's Island Theme Song*. They signed up for “a one year tour....A one year tour.”

The joke was on them. Activated in January 1941, they would not see home again as civilians until half-way through 1945. They wound up going to Ft. Bliss in El Paso, Texas for training and then to Dutch Harbor, Alaska. In the ramp up for the war, the 206<sup>th</sup> Coast Artillery was federalized, sent to Texas, and made their way to Alaska as Army National Guard troops. Many of the young men, including my father, were there for the war's duration.

### **BOOGIE WOOGIE BUGLE BOYS: THE 206<sup>TH</sup> COAST ARTILLERY NATIONAL GUARD UNIT FROM MARIANNA**

Bob Johnson learned to play the trombone in the 206<sup>th</sup> Coast Artillery (Anti-Aircraft) Band. It was a lucky break for him. This skill may have saved his life. T. A. Futrall High School in Marianna did not have a band when he attended. As a three-sport letterman (football, basketball, and track), he wouldn't have joined the high school band if they had one. And yet, when there were openings in the 206<sup>th</sup> Medical Detachment and Band, he was recruited, joined, and either selected or was handed a trombone.

It is unlikely that the horn he wound up playing through the war was the same one originally issued. Family lore has it that his parents purchased a really good instrument for him at some point. Said trombone was a second-hand Olds model, a fine instrument with a small bell and a pure tone that was the envy of every high school trombonist that Bob's daughter, Stephanie, ran into when she was playing that same trombone in high school.

Beadie Johnson stated on more than one occasion that a price of \$400 was paid for the used horn which took her son through World War II. Not to doubt her word, but this seems excessive, especially since it was during the Depression and a whole house could be purchased at that time for \$500. Bob's surviving sister, Lois Barnett Duke, told that during the war she bought a “rat-trap house” for \$500 at the conjunction of Highway 1 North and Highway 79 by the railroad overpass. (Duke)

Bill Dixon researched the history of the trombone in Stephanie's possession, the one Bob Johnson said carried him through the war. The horn's serial number indicates that it was made in December of 1941. Since Bob stated that the trombone was bought used for him by his parents, it is not possible for that particular horn to have been in his possession

until sometime up in the war. In all likelihood, he started out with a National Guard issued trombone when he joined the Guard. It seems a good bet that Beadie and Floyd might have purchased a better instrument for him and given it to him when he came home in '43 for his furlough. The Depression was over and times were better so they could probably afford it by then. And, of course, for all practical purposes, Bob was a professional musician and needed a better instrument.

Internet postings on that Olds trombone claim that this was, indeed, a valuable horn. The F.E. Olds company at that time made trombones that were known for their dark tones due to the heavy metals in them. As the horn was played louder, the tone brightened. The horn was prized then, as now, by blues musicians.

Not that the source of Bob's trombone training matters. He may have been a great athlete, but his true talent was musical. Since he was a boy, he was chosen by Marianna's long-time music teachers, Mr. Evans and Miss Helen Greenhaw, to perform as a soloist, in duets, quartets, and in larger groups. He was a tenor and performed throughout Lee County and adjoining counties whenever one of the music teachers got their students a gig. He often was invited to perform with older singers around Marianna in barbershop quartets and choirs. This went on for his entire life in church choirs and pick-up groups.

Clearly, he understood the rudiments, such as rhythm, harmony, and reading music. And he was a quick study. All of his children regularly heard him sing songs, working in all four parts by himself. Neither they nor any who heard him "get his lip back" in one or two practices for a Clown Band performance for community parades years after the war have any trouble believing that he would soon be an adept trombone player after the merest introduction to the instrument.

The Medical Detachment part of Bob's assignment was harder to believe. Bob Johnson, despite the fact that he served in a war and in later life was a butcher, could barely stand the sight of blood. He was known to get sick and even faint when one of his children was injured. None of us ever questioned his bravery, and yet a couple of us witnessed family emergency medical events in which he was rendered partly or totally useless. This is not the best trait for one in a military medical detachment to possess.

However, the band and the medics were joined at the hip. Traditionally, the military medical corps is taken from the ranks of the band. It is their primary role during fighting. Bob did not talk much about this facet of his service. In fact, he scarcely mentioned it at all. Although he did talk about some of his duties after the Japanese bombed Dutch Harbor, Unalaska, and the action he spoke of clearly involved helping with casualties.

Dr. Bob Boon said that they had absolutely no medical training, and he should know. He said that although the band was designated as part of the Medical Detachment, their role was supposed to be auxiliary medical corps, or stretcher bearers. (Boon)

It should be mentioned that Bob Johnson also possibly joined the Marianna Unit of the National Guard due to its commander, Col. Elgan C. Robertson. He always spoke of Col. Robertson, eventually to become General Robertson, with respect and affection. And on their return home when General Robertson resumed his civilian job as a bank president, he treated Bob well.

Elgan C. Robertson was a World War I veteran and had taken part in the Mexican Expedition of 1916-17 under General John Pershing prior to that. After the first World War, starting in 1927, he commanded an artillery battery for the Guard, the 206<sup>th</sup> in Marianna. His civilian job was president of First National Bank in Marianna. He also held a large interest in a bank in Helena. In 1941 he was the vice president of the Arkansas Bankers Association. He would have moved up to the presidency of that group, but for the lead up to war. (Goldstein, Donald and Dillon, Katherine)

Col. Robertson had a reputation of having a cohesive, well-disciplined Guard unit. The 206<sup>th</sup> was called for training at Fort Bliss in El Paso in January of 1941. Everyone knew that the world was becoming a dangerous place with Germany and Japan becoming growing menaces, but none of the young men could have predicted on what twists of fate their lives would turn in the next few years.

“When Hitler pounced on Poland, we all knew that something was going to happen. President Roosevelt was interested in getting involved. It was time to get everybody ready,” Boon suggested. It wasn’t that big of a surprise by the time the 206<sup>th</sup> was activated and sent off to Ft. Bliss in El Paso, Texas for war training. So most of the young men from the 206<sup>th</sup> deferred going back for another semester of college until they had completed their Ft. Bliss assignment and the month or two needed to finish out their year-long commitment.

Bob and his mother, Beadie, related to Stephanie the send-off that Marianna gave to their boys in the 206<sup>th</sup> the day they marched off for their training in January of 1941. Beadie was working at West Department Store in Marianna. The boys marched through Marianna in parade as they headed either to the train depot or to gather for a motorized convoy. Bob and Bobby Boon got to Texas via the train, while Roy Williams remembers riding down there in a truck and equipment convoy. (Boon, Williams) By either conveyance, it was a three-day journey (Goldstein, Dillon)

All the stores closed temporarily for the send-off parade. As the Guard marched past Beadie’s post in front of West Department Store on Poplar Street, she saw her only son go past. She said she managed to hold it together until all the boys went by, then she and a co-worker, another woman with a son who was leaving, went to the back of the store and burst into tears. Beadie reported that the manager was very kind to them. He told the women that they could go to the stockroom for a while and then could go home for the day.

The Army National Guard 206<sup>th</sup> Coast Artillery was made up of Headquarters Battery, the Medical Detachment and Band from Marianna, the First Battalion, Battalions D and F from Russellville, Battalion B from Monticello, Battalion C from Jonesboro, Battalion G from Helena, H Battalion from Hot Springs, and Headquarters Second Battalion at El Dorado (Goldstein, Dillon). Many of the men in the 206<sup>th</sup> were college students. In fact, the entire Arkansas Tech football team from Russellville was activated.

This regiment included searchlight and radar batteries, anti-aircraft (the main mission), and an automatic weapons unit. In addition to these missions, which they carried out in Alaska, they carried and moved heavy equipment over frozen or muddy roads, built the roads, strung wire for vital communication, built outposts and foxholes, and in the case of one Ralph Beauchamp, ran water line all over the island. In civilian life Ralph was a master plumber. (Beauchamp)

### **DON'T GET AROUND MUCH ANYMORE: Fort Bliss**

The 206<sup>th</sup> was federalized on January 6, 1941 and sent to Fort Bliss in El Paso, Texas on January 14. (Goldstein and Dillon) They ceased to be under the direction of their state's governor and adjutant general and went under the direction of federal forces and the president of the United States. They would serve in this manner for the duration of the war. The men were still laboring under the delusion that their enlistment would be up in a year. Their training would be completed at Fort Bliss and they would be deployed to the Aleutians in August of 1941, they thought at that time. During their encampment in Fort Bliss the band rehearsed. The new recruits from Monticello brought along their band director who had just graduated from Monticello. The gun batteries, trained on new equipment and old WWI equipment.

At El Paso, the boys who had known only Arkansas climate and terrain were exposed to desert conditions. It was windy; there were no windbreaks; there were sandstorms, extreme heat, with temperatures dropping significantly at night. During the winter months it could be positively chilly. Most of the men bunked in tents, but were able to use latrines with decent sanitary conditions. This would not be the case when they got to Alaska. (Boon)

Shortly after the Arkansas Unit began training, the 200<sup>th</sup> National Guard Regiment from New Mexico arrived. The unit arrived as a cavalry unit, complete with horses. After some war games, athletic contests, and competitive jibing back and forth, the Arkansas unit and the New Mexico unit developed a camaraderie. The New Mexico unit lost their cavalry status and were made an artillery unit shortly after their arrival, so part of the 206<sup>th</sup> mission was to train these troops in their outmoded artillery. These two regiments of

young men from very different states started their service together but went off to suffer through very different fates. (Johnson)

The 206<sup>th</sup> time at Ft. Bliss was notable for a couple of things. First, the horse cavalry unit stationed at Ft. Bliss was decommissioned. The band played for the ceremony of the last horse cavalry parade on American soil. (Boon) Of that ceremony, Dr. Boon said, "It was just about the most impressive thing I saw in my time in the military." It should be mentioned that Dr. Boon's father and grandfather were in the horse and mule business back in Lee County, and that Boon's father was a well-known horseman. He fancied Tennessee Walkers in particular, and rode one regularly from his house to his place of business in town.

The second thing was of great import to all of the men in the 206<sup>th</sup>. It was the Coin Toss.

### **BETWEEN THE DEVIL AND THE DEEP BLUE SEA: The Coin Toss**

In July 1941 word came down that the different guard units at Ft. Bliss would get their next duty assignments. A little later rumors went through the camp that the choices were to be either the Philippines or a place in Alaska that no one had ever heard of...Dutch Harbor. Both were considered overseas assignments. The soldiers of the 206<sup>th</sup> had a clear favorite. They wanted to be sent to the Philippines, mostly for the weather, but also because it was perceived to be the least dangerous of the two assignments. Alaska was uncomfortably close to Japan. (Boon, Goldstein and Dillon, Johnson)

The Aleutian Islands are an archipelago of 100 islands dotting the western part of Alaska's peninsula. Dutch Harbor is on the largest of these islands, Unalaska. The winds come out of Siberia with ocean currents from the Bering Sea. But this unattractive vacation climate has other problems. The winds and currents meet the warm air and currents from the Pacific Ocean with a clash that stirs up extraordinarily high winds, rain, thick fog, and snow. (USN Combat Narratives)

These storms are called "Williwaws" by the locals and have to be experienced to be believed. In Dutch Harbor during the war the wind was so fierce it blew off an eight ton steel mat, a Marsdan Mat, that had been placed over a landing strip to allow planes to land in the winter. It simply rolled up. Military trucks got blown over. (Boon)

The soldiers of the 206<sup>th</sup> did not know yet of the infamous Williwaws when they first arrived, but they already knew that they didn't want to go to Alaska. Alaska was the closest American land mass to Japan. It was widely believed at the time that when and if Japan did attack, it would be through that route. (Goldstein and Dillon)

July 28, 1941 the men of the 206<sup>th</sup> Coast Artillery got their orders. They would be headed

for Dutch Harbor, Unalaska and the decision had been made by a coin toss! What happened was that the commander of the 206<sup>th</sup> Coast Artillery (Anti-Aircraft) from Arkansas, Col. Robertson, and the commander of the 200<sup>th</sup> CA (AA) from New Mexico got together and settled the matter with the toss of a coin. (Beauchamp, Boon, Bob Johnson)

Although this unlikely story has been disbelieved by many through the years, it was confirmed as the truth by Col Robertson himself. In the exquisitely researched and highly readable book, *"The Williwaw War"* by Goldstein and Dillon the writers claim that "at a reunion of the 206<sup>th</sup> in 1960, Colonel Robertson confirmed that this unlikely event did in fact take place." (Goldstein and Dillon, p. 354) Not many who knew the man would question Robertson's veracity on this point.

The story further goes that the winner of the coin toss (heads) went to the Philippines. This much is known to be true and factual. The New Mexico unit, most of them from one town, deployed to the Philippines where they fought, were captured by the Japanese, and force-marched in the Bataan Death March. The men from New Mexico, whom the Arkansas unit had become so close to, were wiped out.

### **BABY, IT'S COLD OUTSIDE: North to Alaska**

On July 31, 1941 the men of the 206<sup>th</sup> Coast Artillery (AA) got their last paycheck in El Paso. They were due to start out for Dutch Harbor the next day. They would be at liberty that night and the base's proximity to Juarez, Mexico was problematic. However, Col. Robertson declared that there would be no restrictions on liberty, meaning that the guys could go and do what they wanted to, as long as they were back bright and early and ready to go the next morning. Remarkably, every single one of them complied....every single officer, every single soldier, every last one of them. There were 1,700 soldiers plus officers in the regiment. (Goldstein and Dillon, p 24)

By official Army edict they left El Paso by train in wool winter garments. Well, the Army deduced that they were headed for Alaska. But it was summer in the Southwest and their first stop was Yuma, Arizona. The train was a 40-car troop train, carrying troops, artillery, and all of the other equipment that an army unit must have to function. (Goldstein and Dillon)

They traveled through Utah and into northern California, eventually stopping at Ft. Lewis, Washington near Tacoma. It took 4 or 5 days to reach Ft. Lewis. They were encamped there for a bit and many of the men fell in love with the beauty of the country. There was time for recreation, competitive games, trips into town, and dances, some of which the 206<sup>th</sup> Band played for. (Johnson, Williams)



Roy V. Williams, 83, also of Huntsville, Alabama started his war experience with Bob Johnson and Bobby Boon. Bob was a trombonist, Bobby a saxophonist, and Roy a trumpet player. They were all college boys, either just graduated or still in. Roy Williams had just collected his B. S. in Engineering from a college in Indiana. Bobby Boon was taking leave from Kemper Military School in Tennessee. Bob Johnson had attended college in south Arkansas.

Once at Ft. Lewis, Roy Williams stated, "A call went out for people who might want to be officers. They gave me an I.Q. test, and I must have passed it, because they shipped me out to North Carolina for Officer's Candidate School. I didn't see the guys again till the war was over. (Williams)

Dr. Boon was questioned by Stephanie on how it was that Roy Williams scored high enough on the test and Boon, a person of obvious high intelligence, didn't. Boon reported that getting most of the men to volunteer for officer training was a pretty tall order. He said that he, himself, had decided against it after seeing some films featuring officers having to lead men into dangerous situations, so he declined the offer.

The 206<sup>th</sup> stayed at Ft. Lewis long enough to gather troops from other parts of the country, get some new equipment, including the first units of a new kind of technology, radar, and train on it. Dr. Boon reported that the regimental band, of which he and my father were a part, shipped out toward Alaska on October 10, 1941 aboard the *USS Grant*.

The *Grant* was a small World War I vintage ship commandeered from the Germans at the end of the First World War. It was a cruise liner, not that the soldiers would know that, and carried cruise passengers up and down the western coast between Washington and Alaska for many years. In a bit of historical irony, the *Grant*, originally named the *Konig Wilhelm* (under which it sailed from 1907 to 1917), during 1917-1919 was named the *Madawaska*. The ship was named for a town in Maine. Madawaska is a Mallescite Indian word meaning "land of the porcupine." (Department of Navy, Hartwell) So the troop ship that took them to the Aleutians at one time was named for the men's old high school mascot, the Porcupines.

The ship was renamed the *USS Grant* in 1919 and sailed as that until 1941. During the sailing to the Aleutians, on the upper decks passengers and officers enjoyed comfort and amenities. However, the soldiers' bunks were below deck, down in the cargo hold and below the water line, and infested with bed bugs. The 800 plus men aboard threw the mattresses overboard and slept either in the aisles or on deck. Seasickness was the order of the day. (Goldstein and Dillon, Bob Johnson).

Dr. Boon must not have suffered from seasickness since he claimed that it wasn't too bad a trip. Bob Johnson had another story. He was miserable, as were many of the others.

The *Grant* took the Inside Passage with a few stops at ports such as Ketchikan and Skagway along the way. They went to Seward and did not disembark until they arrived at Dutch Harbor, ten days after they left the mainland. (Goldstein and Dillon) Williwaw season was not there yet. (Boon)

Goldstein and Dillon, the authors of *The Williwaw War* wrote that the men of the 206<sup>th</sup> arrived in Alaska in mid-November of 1941, a few weeks before Pearl Harbor. Dr. Boon stated that they may have been there six-to-eight weeks before the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. Dr. Boon's memory generally is pretty accurate, while Goldstein and Dillon had access to official records, so there is a conflict about the accurate date of their arrival.

Be that as it may, one can only imagine how these inexperienced young Arkansas men reacted after being sent to west Texas for desert training and finally arriving at the extreme northern end of the world, and at the front end of the Alaskan winter. Nothing about it was reminiscent of home. The native Alaskans of the area, the Aleuts, called the marshy, spongy soil, "muskeg." The servicemen had to sleep in Quonset huts that were partially underground to keep them from blowing away in the wind. It could be colder than a witch's elbow. There were those cussed williwaws. And the weather was wholly unpredictable.

The most difficult part of their adjustment was dealing with the weather. At first they were housed in wooden huts, distinguished mostly by the other residents, rats. According to Dr. Boon, "We had to dig into the side of the hill. We'd build these Quonset huts in the holes and partly covered them up to keep the wind from knocking them over. The ones that weren't buried up that way, they had to string wires over them and hold them down with stakes to keep them from blowing off the sheet metal. The wind was so high it could turn over military trucks." But the Quonset Huts were amenities compared to their first shelter.

They then started in on doing what they had been sent to do. At Dutch Harbor and later at Amchitka, Boon said the band practiced, marched in some parades, went down to the docks and played when the troop ships came in, played hymns at the chapel and at funeral ceremonies when officers died. He suggested that what the band enjoyed the most was playing in the dance band that entertained at the Officer's Club dances (with the female nurses in attendance), and at the NCO Club about once a week. "We got a little whiskey and maybe a little cash from the tip jar. Our headquarters was a hole in the ground, but the Officer's Club was where the nurses were. Of course they were all officers and couldn't date enlisted men."

Both Bob and Dr. Boon seemed to have good memories of having been in the band. They enjoyed the camaraderie and the music. Several of the men had specialty musical numbers that they performed and which became popular requests. Dr. Boon sang cowboy songs and his singular number was "The Birmingham Jail." A photo that he has

from that time shows a small group of musicians dressed up as country and western performers.

Bob Johnson's specialty was the Bunny Berrigan hit "I Can't Get Started." (Bob Johnson) The music was written by Vernon Duke with lyrics by Ira Gershwin.

Here are Gershwin's lyrics:

I've been around the world in a plane  
I've settled revolutions in Spain  
The North Pole I have charted  
Still I can't get started with you.

And at the golf course I'm under par  
Metro-Goldwyn has asked me to star  
I've got a house a show place  
Still I can't get no place with you

You're so supreme  
Lyrics I write of you  
Dream, day and night of you  
Scheme, just for the sight of you  
Oh Babe, what good does it do?

I've been consulted by Franklin D.  
And Greta Garbo has asked me to tea  
But I'm broken-hearted  
Cause I can't get started with you.

As one who remembers being serenaded to that tune, I can only report that my dad did a terrific Bunny Berigan impression. I do not know if he played the tune's signature trumpet solo on the trombone or if a trumpet player from the band stepped in to share the spotlight, but the vocalist was tops. It is easy to understand that a soft tenor singing a medium tempo, popular swing tune about unrequited love way up would bring them to their feet begging for more way up in the Aleutians. Plus, I can say, without fear of contradiction, that "I Can't Get Started" was the last song that was sung to Daddy in his lifetime.

I always assumed, because our Mother told me so, that Dad's Army nickname of "Bunny" came from his impression of Bunny Berigan. Dr. Boon disagrees. "I think it came from his sports days, and we played sports in the Aleutians as well as in high school. Everyone thought he was small, but fast."

Away from their band duties they helped out the camp in other ways. “Because there were not enough personnel, some of the guys helped on Navy PBV’s (Patrol Bomber, a seaplane) and others, served as ammunition passers and on gun crews.” Boon worked at the base hospital as a lab assistant. Horace Bonner was a trained accountant and did that.

The band was given a chance to help out other places, played in the NCO club maybe once a week and at the Officers’ Club. They also got proficient with shovels. The gun batteries were in the process of digging in, the Corps of Engineers were not there yet, so the job had to be done by shovel and wheel barrow. No earth moving equipment was on the islands yet.

Boon continued, “We spent most of the time digging holes and preparing huts. I think we adjusted well. There was lots of horseplay and we were a very compatible group, most of whom had been in college. We had little dissension, and didn’t pull KP. For our physical regimen we did calisthenics each morning.”

### **STOMPING AT THE SAVOY: Food and Living Conditions**

It would have been a prime recipe for homesickness, if there had been time for it. But the men had to dig in and stay on alert.. Official and unofficial reports indicated that the Japanese would be attacking U. S. territories soon. The fox holes were dug mostly in the mountains. The food was standard army fare, “warm and greasy.”(Boon)

The men soon learned that between williwaws it might be sunny with relatively pleasant days. But during active storms, it was impossible to walk. A person might be leaning nearly parallel to the ground, then fall flat on his face when the wind suddenly stopped. (Boon) They could count on such winds from early December until late May.

Some of the men discovered Blackie’s Bar, which was an infamous joint already in place at the town of Dutch Harbor before the war started. Blackie Floyd, the owner, was the reputed brother or half-brother of the gangster Pretty Boy Floyd. (Beauchamp, Goldstein and Dillon) He ran his establishment with an iron hand. Customers stood in line (which started outside) snaked in until it was their turn, paid their money for a drink, and then left out the back door. Drinks were \$3 to \$4 a beer, but the men often ran from the back door right back to a spot in line. (Goldstein and Dillon)

“We were very isolated, so we didn’t get much variety in our diet. A supply ship came every so often and some would go help unload the boats to steal some of the officers’ meat,” Boon alleges. “Fishing crews would go out to catch fish and would share with the others, because the army cooks would boil ribs and slap them on your mess kit, and a big blue stamp saying ‘USDA Inspected’ would still be on it. We got some canned vegetables and fruit but that was it.” And it was rare.

In the middle of the war when supply boats were coming in more slowly, the men survived on two meals a day of pancakes and sauerkraut. On Thanksgiving Day 1943 they only had sauerkraut, for breakfast and dinner. However, when the supply ship did arrive, everyone got a belated Thanksgiving dinner with all the trimmings. (Goldstein)

For toilet facilities, when they first arrived they had to use slit trenches. These are extremely primitive, basically out in the open. Later, outhouses were dug. The band had one designated as its own.

During the early years boredom was already leading to despair and a fair number of suicides, but none from the band. The band fought off those feelings with other activities. They accompanied many of the USO entertainers and celebrities who came to the Aleutians to cheer up the troops. The favorite of them all, by far, was comedian Joe E. Brown. (Goldstein and Dillon, Johnson) Brown not only entertained, he went around to all of the barracks and huts, visiting with the men for several days.

Through the war years, there were several entertainers and shows. Bob Hope and his show, ventriloquist Edgar Bergen and his monocled dummy Charlie McCarthy, Errol Flynn (who went over well with the nurses, but not necessarily the men), Olivia de Havilland (Melanie, *Gone With the Wind*), actress Marjorie Reynolds, and lesser lights.

Bob Boon claims that the band backed up most of these acts “since the Army wouldn’t spring for them to bring their own bands.” Dad proclaimed Edgar Bergen the most talented entertainer he ever saw. Most of the rest of the entertainers came with a small entourage, but Bergen showed up with only a trunk full of dummies. (Johnson)

Dad did not write many letters, at least few that survived. But there is one that he wrote to his family in July 1944. In it he specifically addresses his nephew, Mickey Odom, and tells him how much he wished Mickey could come up to Alaska and help him hunt foxes. “I’m scared of them, by myself,” he wrote. (Johnson letter)

Dr. Boon reported that the troops had fairly reliable mail service both to and from the States. He pointed out that some of the Dad’s old photographs of Dutch Harbor had a hole punched in the corner. This was the designation that the picture passed the censor.

With bad weather and sparse accommodations, there were ways to hurt yourself that no one had ever thought of. For example, fellow bandsman and Good Ole Marianna Boy, Cliff Williams, broke his arm in an odd nighttime accident. He got up in the middle of the night to go outside and relieve himself and slipped on the icy porch, falling and breaking his arm. The medical staff at the base hospital declared it a clean break and handed him a bucket full of coal. It didn’t need to be set, they said, but told Cliff he needed to keep it straight and strengthen it. The coal was the strengthening part of the equation. The

trouble was that it was during cold weather and coal was in short supply. Cliff's hut mates kept stealing his coal and burning it in the fireplace. (Beauchamp)

Dr. Boon states, "We had Sibley stoves, just conical pieces of metal with pipe. Most of the time it was fired with pressed sawdust. We'd also go to the dock and unload coal from the ships. You could take your bucket with you and fill it when you were there.

Boon continues that their Quonset huts were standard issue, which began to arrive in January of '42. Before that they lived in 8-man Army tents, which could be pretty uncomfortable.

But desperate times call for desperate measures. Boon also was the company supply sergeant and company clerk, and as such, had access to things that others might not. One could also say that he was the company moonshiner. "I got raisins or whatever kind of dried fruit I could scrounge from the mess sergeant and I'd make Sneaky Pete, a fermented beverage." (Boon)

Some people also were able to take a large granite coffee pot and whittle a wooden insulator to fit in the spout and get a piece of copper pipe, That would strengthen the Sneaky Pete by partial distillation. (Boon)

Boon continues, "The rumor was that someone got a .30 caliber machine gun and used the water cooler from that to cool the steam," but he never tried that, Boon claimed.

### **PRAISE THE LORD AND PASS THE AMMUNITION: The Japanese Attack Dutch Harbor**

Bob Johnson didn't enjoy talking with his children about his military experiences. But when he did respond to questions of being in combat during the war, he minced no words.

Stephanie remembers, "Daddy always told us that he was shot at only over a two-day period....that the Japanese sent airplanes in to attack Dutch Harbor and that the regiment expected them to come at some point, so the Americans were on alert. When someone saw the Japanese planes coming, everybody ran for the hills. They jumped in foxholes, which they previously dug into the side of the mountains and waited for them. "

One of the scandals of the war in the Aleutians was the almost dismissive nature that the military hierarchy had toward the troops there, as if those men were expendable. Their equipment, although it did get better as the war went on, was not the most modern, effective, and there was not nearly enough of it. There was a dearth of ammunition, so much so that the commanders at Dutch Harbor put out orders to save what they had for "the real thing." This would have been fine, if the men could have been adequately

trained and thoroughly practiced with their weapons. But without ammo to practice with, mostly what the troops did with their artillery, small weapons, and rifles was to maintain it and learn to take it apart and put it back together in the dark. (Goldstein) For the men in the band, there was even less ammunition available, although when the Japanese attacked, the bandsmen were under attack also.

Dr. Robert Boon has a clear memory of what happened before and during the attack. “We had been put on alert many times and told we would be attacked. Our troops gradually had built up force by two regiments. They dispersed the gun batteries and moved out them of Ft. Mears into the hills and dug in. People in the band were to help as ammunition passers, and such. So we spent most of that time helping dig out for foxholes and gun emplacements.”

Dr. Boon recollected his experience. “We had been on alert for some time and told to be ready to “run for the hills”. We had several drills and some false alarms.” In confusion one night, Boon said the alarm was sounded and he jumped out of bed and put his galoshes on wrong feet, making a swift ascent into the mountains comical and impossible.

Boon also says that in their role as medical assistants the band members wore Red Cross armbands. They were not supposed to carry weapons and wear those armbands, as it was against the Geneva Convention accords. But with Japanese planes shooting at everyone, the band included, most of the men must have felt that this was too fine a distinction.

“Daddy told me once that he and several others slipped off their Red Cross armbands and put them in their pockets. They tried to defend themselves and their regiment when the Japanese planes came over. When they came back out of the hills after the battle, they put the armbands back on,” Stephanie states.

“When the real attack started we were alerted probably an hour before that something going on. Of course, we didn’t know it was a side-show to the Battle of Midway. Dutch Harbor was just a diversion,” Boon continued. “Our radar crews were not really that familiar with the equipment. They saw some blips and the first actual attack was by high altitude bombers, followed by strafers on the main camp, which we had vacated.”

According to the authors of *The Williwaw War*, the attack on Dutch Harbor was expected by everyone there, even civilians. Warnings came as early as May of 1942. And the warnings were grim. One report had it that 65,000 Japanese troops were on the way. Another predicted that the Americans would be outnumbered 6 to 1. Due to the fact that Americans had broken the Japanese code, the American troops knew they were coming under attack, they just weren’t certain when that would be. But one report on June 2

indicated that a Japanese carrier was spotted about 400 miles away from Unalaska Island.

“We knew that the attack on Dutch Harbor would be a diversionary tactic. Our side had that information and ambushed the Japanese at Midway. The main body of their fleet was destroyed there,” Boon said. This was cold comfort for people sitting in foxholes with pistols, waiting for the Japanese Emperor’s Navy and Air Corps to come at them.

Col. Robertson and other commanders ordered both army and navy personnel to man the anti-aircraft guns at the beaches and other possible invasion sites. Some of the men slept in foxholes in the mountains, while others slept for days in their clothes with their rifles either laying across them or nearby. (Goldstein and Dillon)

When the attack came, it was still a surprise. The Japanese planes left the carriers *Ryujo* and *Junyo* at approximately 3:18 a.m. on June 3, 1942. The planes had delayed taking off due to heavy fog. This fog prevented the *Junyo* planes from locating Dutch Harbor and they returned to their ship, leaving only the 17 planes from the *Ryujo* to complete the attack. By 6 a.m. they were over Dutch Harbor, Unalaska and starting the fight. (Goldstein and Dillon, 144-145)

On the first pass, recon planes photographed the island with the fighters and bombers close behind. Despite the fact that some of the American troops began firing on the Japanese immediately, an odd “no fire” order went out from Col. Robertson. It was believed that the Japanese planes might be friendly Navy planes. When the Japanese began their second pass and started bombing, school was out. It was clear that they were under enemy attack and the Americans responded in kind. (Goldstein)

When the Japanese Zeroes came out of the clouds at Dutch Harbor, many of the men on the island were either at their posts or scrambling to them. The three-inch guns there for port protection were not set to angles that made it possible to hit any of the planes, which mostly flew at high altitudes. However, some of the anti-aircraft fire was effective at hitting some of the planes, it just wasn’t enough to bring down any.

The Japanese would dive down and attack, then pull up out of range from the American guns. Some of the American troops were still in bed when the attack started and initially thought that target practice was going on, but then remembered that nobody would waste that much ammo. They scrambled to safety. (Goldstein and Dillon)

Dr. Boon reported that his Bob Johnson’s hutmates got out and up into the hills in a hurry. “We were strafed, but all of us were in foxholes, so we were all right. Our anti-aircraft crews were quite active.”

It did not take long for all military personnel on the island to get to their posts and start firing at the Japanese. Many of the 206<sup>th</sup> had to use steel helmets left over from WWI and



went into their foxholes with only their sidearms to protect themselves. Had it been a full-scale assault, it is doubtful that the Americans could have defended themselves very well.

“During the Japanese attack, we were below the gun battlements and they shot over our heads. All the band was allowed to carry was pistols, so we used pistols to shoot at them,” Dr. Boon stated.

The men were in danger not only from direct hits by the bombs, but by the shrapnel hitting all around them. (Goldstein, 152) There was no air support for the Americans because the air corps located nearby was not close enough to get there until the fighting was over. Plus, communication to the outside world was not up to par. An ocean cable was not completed until July, a full month after the attack. (Goldstein and Dillon)

The high altitude bombing took its toll on the base hospital and on some of the Ft. Mears barracks area. Most of the casualties happened there. (Goldstein, 152) Once they got over Dutch Harbor, the weather cleared for the Japanese, giving them the definite advantage.

The tragedy of the casualties is that most of the men who died or were greatly injured were troops that had come in only the day before. They weren't yet informed that they should hit the shelters at 4:30 a.m. Goldstein and Dillon state in *The Williwaw War* that bombs “struck Barracks 864 and 866, catching the new troops just as they were ‘leaving the barracks and into formation.’” Seventeen were killed and 25 were wounded.

Bob Johnson was less charitable in his determination of what happened and he told the story with authority, as if he knew. He stated more than once that the unfortunate men in those barracks were ordered out into the street and to attention by a 90-day Wonder, an unflattering term for a brand new second lieutenant who had recently completed Officer's Candidate School. These men were felt by the enlisted men to be impressed with their own sense of power and not possessed of much sense of any kind. In this case, the assessment was probably true. The officer himself was also killed, standing at attention in the middle of the street, as the Japanese dropped bombs upon him and his men.

Another set of casualties occurred when an officer in the Engineer company marched his troops into their foxholes just before a bomb hit in the middle of it. It appears that the targets on June 3 were the warehouses that presumably held ammunition. Two warehouses were destroyed. (Goldstein and Dillon)

“The base hospital was hit, along with some civilian targets. Some civilian workers and troops, about 170 or so were killed, but no one from our unit,” Dr. Boon believes. A nurse at the base hospital is credited with moving the 13 patients in the base hospital into the cement basement, thus saving them from further injury or death. (Goldstein and Dillon)

One Zero was hit and crashed into the Bay. But the anti-aircraft guns were not of much use. They couldn't be set at lower than 15 degrees, and the Zeros came in lower than that. Bob Johnson reported that the American boys had been told that the Japanese had poor eyesight, which made them less-than-great pilots and worse shots. Neither of these theories was true. "He told me that he saw the planes come out of the sky, turning sideways to get through the valleys without crashing into the mountains, and mostly avoiding the gunfire that came at them. He reported being close enough to them to see the pilots' faces. These were images which clearly were etched in his memory," Stephanie relates.

He wasn't the only one. Ralph Beauchamp told his daughter, Sandy, many times of that attack. He thought that he may have shot down a Japanese plane. "I couldn't have missed him," Ralph said. "He looked right at me and smiled." Ralph was convinced that his gunfire hit the plane. (Beauchamp)

The stories of these men and others of the 206<sup>th</sup> are all the more impressive when one understands that they defended themselves with inadequate weaponry that they were not even close to being adequately trained on. It was much like being sent out to go bear hunting with a switch.

The black smoke seen in some of Bob Johnson's pictures from the war evidently came from fuel tanks on nearby Amaknak Island. There were some military photographers in the Aleutians, including longtime *Arkansas Gazette* photographer Larry Obsitnik. Many of his photos are included in various accounts of the Dutch Harbor raid. (Goldstein and Dillon) What is not well known even among family members is that Bob Johnson learned photography and darkroom skills while in the service and took several of the photographs displayed on the accompanying CD. Since he did not sign or identify which photos were his, it is impossible to tell which of the post-attack photos are his.

When the bombing and strafing stopped, the men came out to investigate the damage. The 206<sup>th</sup> Band ran down to do their appointed duties, helping attend to the wounded and dying (Bob Johnson, Boon) In Goldstein and Dillon's book, there is a mention of one of the casualties, a bugler named Pfc. Allen C. "Cop" Collier. (Goldstein and Dillon) This possibly is the man that Dad spoke about as the friend who died in the war.

Though he didn't identify the man by name, sometimes Dad spoke of one of his buddies, a man who did not survive the day. But he lived long enough to see Bob Johnson and to call out his nickname, "Bunny." It is reasonable to assume that only those who knew him best, the musicians, would know him by sight and by that nickname.

Of that encounter Bob Johnson recalled that he came upon a couple of men, one that he knew well. The man was lying on his stomach and gasping for breath, his entire back blown off and his internal organs visible. Bob went to him to try to comfort him despite injuries that would prove fatal. His buddy called to him to "Turn me over, Bunny.

I can't breathe. Turn me over." Dad said that he knew that to turn him over would kill the man, but that he only had minutes to live anyway. He crouched beside the soldier until he could no longer stand the pleas of the dying man.

"So I turned him over....and he was gone." Bob didn't tell that story much, maybe only once or twice. When he did, he had a catch in his voice and tears came to his eyes, as if it had happened only the day before. Clearly, the episode haunted him.

But there was no time for mourning. They had work to do. In addition to stretcher-bearing, the 206<sup>th</sup> had other pressing duties. One bomb had hit a transmitting antenna, a shelter trench, and a Quonset hut. Part of the Officer's Club, a warehouse area used to store liquor was hit. Some officers' barracks were gone, as was the wall that enclosed the liquor stores. Some of the men made off with the good bourbon and scotch before a guard could be posted. A few warehouses, including one full of undelivered Christmas presents, were destroyed. (Goldstein and Dillon)

On the way back to their carriers, two Japanese reconnaissance planes were shot down by American aircraft on patrol. It was suspected that several other planes sustained damage, but the Japanese got the better of the situation.

The commanders immediately got the men busy digging new foxholes and moving into new positions. A ground assault and naval invasion was expected to take place the next day or even that night. There was no time to waste. (Goldstein and Dillon)

Although he is given no credit for it in *The Williwaw War*, it was reported as fact by the men who were there (Johnson, Boon, Beauchamp, others) that Col. Elgan Robertson was responsible for saving the base and the men in it with a bit of military sleight of hand. Robertson called upon all the soldiers in the vicinity to report for assistance in moving gun emplacements and ammunition before the morning.

Robertson, who had fallen out of favor with many of the men due, one must gather, to his patrician attitude and bearing, as well as for some orders that no one could see the sense of. It was suspected that he was too "old school" for that modern war and was ineffective in being able to get the proper tools and weapons for his regiment. (Johnson, Goldstein and Dillon.)

However, whether it was old-time military training or just a hunch, Robertson's orders to move everything proved to be effective. How effective? The Japanese dropped many bombs the next day, June 4, but these bombs hit the targets that had held gun emplacements and munitions on June 3. On June 4 anything important was camouflaged up in the hills and there were only dummy guns and empty buildings there when the Japanese struck a second time. (Goldstein and Dillon, p. 162)

According to our father, “We all cursed Col. Robertson for making us stay up all night and work so hard. A lot of us couldn’t see the sense in it. But he knew what he was doing, and it saved us.”

When the necessary work was done, Robertson issued a message at 8:35 p.m. that “all positions must be occupied until relieved. Relief crews should get as much sleep as possible. All positions be on the alert for ground attack throughout the night. Everyone must be up by daylight. Be especially watchful for both high and hedge-hopping dive bombers should we have another air attack. Well pleased with work today.” (Goldstein)

The next day Robertson’s orders were to “be especially alert for small water craft and landing parties from now until dawn.” They were ready for the second attack. The irony was that there would have been no second attack if the Japanese plan had worked. Their plan was to make an air attack on the island of Adak to prepare for ground invasions. However, there was dense fog around Adak and there was supposed to be good visibility over Dutch Harbor.

Despite the damage done to Dutch Harbor the day before, the Japanese were not happy with the result. So they decided to go back and finish the job.

Most of the American munitions and guns had been placed on Mt. Ballyhoo, a 1,600 foot mountain given its name by Jack London. A good bit of the foxholes were there as well. Dr. Robert Boon has in his collection a picture of Mt. Ballyhoo. It sits at the mouth of the harbor at Dutch Harbor and is a very steep mountain, nearly vertical near the top. It is hard to imagine the American troops being able to maneuver their guns up that mountain in a year’s time, let alone overnight.

The troops waited on alert until they heard the first sirens. The Zeros came in thick and fast and the American soldiers fired at them with whatever they had to fire with. Some planes got hit, but were able to fly back out to sea. It is believed that some of the planes must have gone down in the sea. (USN Combat Narrative)

Bob Johnson said that he got “a real good look” at one pilot who flew at eye level with him. He fired upon the pilot, but didn’t know if he hit anything. Many of the new gun positions were hit that day but there were no casualties among their regiment. Col. Robertson’s bright idea worked.

There were casualties that day though. The Japanese dropped ten bombs on Mt. Ballyhoo, nine of which were not effective. One, however, hit near a magazine on the mountain, killing one officer and three enlisted men. (USN Combat Narrative)

It was on the second day that the hospital got hit and hit good. Since the patients and

medical personnel had been moved, no one was hurt. More damage was done to fuel tanks at the harbor. The fire burned for 3 days. (Goldstein and Dillon) The bombers also hit a beached ship, *The Northwestern*, and it burned, “killing one million rats.” (Goldstein and Dillon) Although it was a supply ship, that night Tokyo Rose reported that “Japanese bombers destroyed a warship at the Dutch Harbor pier.” (Goldstein and Dillon)

Although the Americans weathered the second attack better, they had been no more effective against the Japanese the second day than they had the first. Their weapons were ineffective and outmoded. Six American soldiers and three sailors were killed that day. But the fuel tanks on Power House Hill and the ammunition magazine on Mt. Ballyhoo were intact.

During the two-day battle the American forces lost 33 Army, 8 Navy, 1 Marine, 1 civilian, and had 50 wounded. Twenty-five pilots and crew were lost. No one from the 206<sup>th</sup> was killed. (USN Combat Narrative, Goldstein)

Our fighter planes engaged some pilots from the *Junyo* over Unalaska. Each side lost two planes. The airfield had been a prime target and American pilots acknowledged that if a bomb had hit it there would be no more airfields in the Aleutians. (Goldstein and Dillon)

Some Japanese planes were hit over the airfields and did no damage to them, although a couple of American planes did go down in the dogfight. American pilots flew off Alaskan waters over the Japanese carriers and dropped bombs, thinking that they had been sunk. They hadn't. The Japanese shipped sailed away without damage. Soon after the Japanese admiral Kakuta received a message concerning the Battle of Midway. It was a cryptic message stating that he should rendezvous with Japanese Vice Admiral Nagumo of the First Mobile Force. That force had four carriers with men who fought at Pearl Harbor and other places. Kakuta deduced that this wasn't good news. (Goldstein)

The Japanese carriers turned away from the Aleutians and headed back. Later Admiral Yamamoto ordered Kakuta to attack Dutch Harbor by sea as had been planned, but by then the force was closing in on its meeting with Nagamo's forces, and they were limping. (Goldstein and Dillon)

Fortunately for the American forces, an invasion didn't occur. They continued to plan for another attack and a possible ground invasion. (Goldstein and Dillon) Many believed that despite the fighting spirit of the Americans, there wasn't enough ammo or sufficient artillery to stop the Japanese.

With only four hours of daylight left they attempted to take care of casualties and move the radar placements to better positions. The American soldiers were to move the artillery and to hide in the foothills of Unalaska. The AA guns were moved again, this time to the top of the mountain.

Col. Robertson issued another order:” Be prepared and watchful during the night for seaborne attack. Be prepared for early morning air attack.” Subsequent calls to alert were rescinded when the planes spotted turned out to be ours. (Goldstein and Dillon)

Several of the men interviewed for Goldstein and Dillon’s book said that nearly everyone acquitted himself bravely and well, despite being poorly armed. One claimed that when they were sent to Dutch Harbor they were supposed to have been given a couple of 50 caliber anti-aircraft guns, which would have been very helpful. They had all been sent to Fairbanks instead. They felt that their guns were obsolete and about all they could do was “shoot at the planes with their rifles.”

Despite the damage done to facilities and the casualties, not much happened to change things on Dutch Harbor. At the end of the battle the Americans still controlled the island, the damage was repaired, and the Japanese carriers that attacked were prevented from being at Midway, where their presence could have changed the course of the war.

The Japanese lost nine planes, one of them fateful in the outcome of the war. One Zero, piloted by a man named Koga, landed at Akutan Island in order to be picked up by a Japanese sub after he ran low on fuel.

Dr. Boon remembered that luck ran out for that Japanese pilot and his Zero. When his plane was hit, “he tried to land with his landing gear down in that muskeg. His plane flipped and it broke his neck. But the plane was damaged very little. Our boys located it and brought it back to States. It was studied by our engineers, so we could build planes to overcome the Japanese advantage.”

After Americans discovered the plane, it sat undisturbed on the island until sleds could be brought in to drag it out. The plane had few bullet holes, one in the gas tank and there was damage to a propeller, which was repaired by the Americans when an American-made propeller was found to fit it. (Goldstein and Dillon)

It was an important find. The Japanese had clear air superiority up till then, thanks to the Zeros. But American engineers and test pilots were able to fix the plane, making it air-worthy again. They learned much of value about it, such as what features made it such a superb fighting plane and perhaps more valuable, what it’s deficiencies were. As a result, the U. S. made changes to its existing planes and learned how to fight against the Zeros. It is not a stretch to say that this knowledge was a crucial point to winning the war.

Although emotions must have run high during the attacks, all reports indicated that the men of the 206<sup>th</sup> and the other regiments at Ft. Myers performed as well as they could according to their training.

After the first attack, Dr. Boon said that the group he was with didn't hear about people getting hurt till later. "But we saw camp burning and then we knew we needed to go help with clean-up. Our area just had strafing." His assessment was that when the Japanese came on the second day, he supposed they had heard of the disaster at Midway and went to Attu to rest and resupply rather than to continue to attack Dutch Harbor.

Of Col. Robertson's tactics between the two Japanese attacks, Boon confirmed that Robertson kept people up all night to move munitions. "It was rather miraculous. that they could move an entire gun battery and it's position, but it was done....overnight. As a result, there were very few casualties and the Japanese bombed the old gun positions where no one was."

Many days, even weeks later it became apparent that the Japanese were not planning another immediate attack on Dutch Harbor. Things slowly began to get back to normal.

### **I'LL BE SEEING YOU: Furloughs**

In *The Williwaw War*, Goldstein mentions that late in 1942 the Aleutians troops began to be given furloughs back to the States. This first was done through a lottery system and men started going on 15-day furloughs through rotation.

Dr. Bob Boon recalled the story: "In May 1943 we were given a chance to come home on furlough as part of that process. But we had to find our own transport. We were to go down to the dock and wait for a chance to catch a ride." Boon also reported that he and Bob Johnson were in a group that were allowed 30-day furloughs.

"One day at the dock, this dilapidated tug came through pulling a barge of scrap. The tug was short two men on crew and said we could ride to the states. It turned out that in a storm the front hatches been damaged and so the available bunks leaked water. So I went down by the engine room to try to sleep, and slept on a coil of rope down there. It was an old WWI hand-fired tug and quite dusty. By the time we got to states I was quite dirty, since no there were no facilities to wash and no toilets. You had to hang onto a rope and hang over the side."

Bobby Boon may have been dirty but Bob Johnson was in even worse shape. Boon continued, "Bob became very seasick and when the tug finally got to Prince Rupert in Canada, he was taken off the tug and taken to the hospital to be rehydrated from prolonged vomiting. There was no option for me to stay with him. I got put on a freight/passenger boat to Vancouver, and then on a train to Ft. Lewis where I finally could get cleaned up. I was given clothes, then went on by train to Minnesota and then down to Arkansas, where furlough started."

“We got 30 days,” Boon said. “After Bob recovered, he came on to the States. All this time didn’t count against furlough till we got to Ft. Lewis.”

While on furlough in Arkansas the two Marianna boys went around and visited many friends and family. They went to see a buddy from Jonesboro, who threw them a party. Some photographs exist showing the two Bobs at this party, in their dress uniforms, with new and old friends.(Boon)

### **GI JIVE: Back to Dutch Harbor, On to Amchitka**

After their furlough, in 1943 the regiment was broken up and sent back to the States for retraining as a combat unit. Boon said “The band was given the opportunity to transfer into a gun battery.” Those who chose that option would be reactivated, most of them to a lower rank, and send on to Europe to fight with the infantry or they could stay in the band and go to Amchitka. Boon says that he and Bob Johnson put their heads together and decided they’d rather stay in the band. They were on Amchitka for a year. (Boon)

As hard as it was to believe, many men chose the option to go to the European theater. Going to the thick of the fighting in Europe was preferable to those bored, lonely, depressed soldiers than staying another night in the Aleutians. The ones who chose to stay, figuring that they probably would be safer where they were, (Boon), were designated as part of the 238<sup>th</sup> Army Ground Forces Band.

“Bob and I elected to stay there and shortly after we were sent to Amchitka. Then replacements were sent up from the States. All of them were draftees,” Boon explains. These replacements also filled slots of the band members who chose to go to Europe. By the time the war ended Bob Johnson and Bobby Boon were the only two original members of the 206<sup>th</sup> Band still in the Aleutians. (Boon)

“By the time the war was over, the band company replaced everyone but he and I,” Dr. Boon asserts.

Before they left Dutch Harbor, the remains of the old 206<sup>th</sup> Coast Artillery, now designated the 238<sup>th</sup> Ground Forces, loaded all their equipment on a barge. Dr. Boon remembered that the barge meandered out to Amchitka, which was quite a long way. “When we got there we played for some parades and Officers Clubs and some USO entertainers.”

On Amchitka the military consisted of a 28-piece band, with the rest being part Navy , part Army, and part Air Corps, which built an air strip that was used to fly reconnaissance. There were nurses, who dated only officers, and some civilians that Dr. Boon says they had little or no contact with.



Very few of Bob Johnson's letters from the Aleutians remain. Here in its entirety is one from July 1944:

Dearest Family,

Here I come with a few more lines of this and that. Now ain't I a good boy for writing so often? I have been trying to write at least twice each week since I came back.

Well, we still aren't doing much playing in the band. Several of the boys are still on special service and we are kindly short on men right now. The new director seems like a pretty good man, so maybe we will get back on the line soon. We have all been getting in some good individual practice lately.

Some of those rumors are still floating around up here, so don't be surprised at anything that happens. After all, one never knows does one, especially these days. Well, all the news sounds pretty good lately, so maybe I will be clerking in that store sooner than we think.

I surely was glad to hear that deal worked out o.k. on that bull for Dad. I hope he turns out to be a champion. Sorry, Willia (sic) had such bad luck on her trip. Did she just fail to lock the car, or did they break in. I thought that was a mistake from the beginning. We never grow too old to learn, do we?

I wrote Cliff and Fay letters last night. Here they are kindly disappointed in the place down there. Fay is over in Chaffee, near Pine Bluff I think. Also wrote (can't read), Max, and Dan. Surely was glad to hear about Bob Cothran. They should get along fine.

Tell Mickey that I wish he was up here, so we could hunt some of the fox. I am scared of them, by myself. Keep writing and sending the papers, enjoy them a lot.

Love, Bob

P.S. Mom I wouldn't send any more telegrams, unless in case of an emergency. The service on them is very bad now. Mail is faster.

It was pretty much business as usual with eternal days or nights, depending on the season. Boredom was again the enemy. Depression and suicide became the result. It was the band's job to keep up morale, but it was a losing proposition. It became so bad that even the top USO entertainers couldn't break the gloom. Goldstein reports that Bob Hope and singer Frances Langford came to some of the islands, but got a ho-hum reception. In 1943 when singer Martha O'Driscoll, apparently a favorite of the time, came to Amchitka for a performance, many of the soldiers couldn't even be bothered to get out of their bunks and go watch. This was a very bad sign. (Goldstein and Dillon)

Goldstein points out that most of the men were in tough shape. Then he quotes from a book by Brian Garfield, *The Thousand-Mile War: World War II in Alaska and the Aleutians*:

A few psychology logically hardy souls took up such hobbies as photography, but they were in the minority. All too many “turned inward to feed on their own acids, and retired from reality.”

So that’s where he learned photography! As gratifying as it is to see one’s father described as a “psychologically hardy soul” sixty-four years after the fact, these conditions could not have been good for the mental health of any of the men.

By all accounts, the Southern boys from rural areas fared much better than those from the North. Plus, Dr. Boon does not think that they lost any band members to suicide. Although there is no conclusive proof about the why or wherefore, it seems logical to suggest that perhaps the Southerners, the farm boys, were accustomed to wide open spaces and to having to entertain themselves. Don’t suggest to them that there was nothing to do or to think about as long as there were fish all around them and wildlife to shoot at. Besides, being hard-wired to keep busy had to have helped. The Southerners, with their close family connections and boyhood friends in their own unit were much better equipped to withstand the harsh, lonely stretches of the Arctic winters.

At some point in his Aleutian service, Bob Johnson was awarded a Purple Heart, (Johnson), although none of his survivors knows where it is, if indeed it ever got to him. He said that it came about due to the arrogance and stupidity of “another 90-day Wonder.” He claimed that a group of men from his unit, with Dad as sergeant, were ordered by a lieutenant brand new to the Aleutians to put on light packs for a hike into the mountains.. When Bob called out his group and they all were standing in winter uniforms with heavy packs, the lieutenant blew a gasket. Despite Bob’s reasoning and pleading that the men knew what they were marching into and wouldn’t volunteer to carry the heavy packs and clothes unless they were really needed, the new officer was hell-bent to show his authority. He ordered then to change their clothes and bring the lighter packs.

Of course, when they left the sun was out. Within a few hours the men had marched up into the hills and bad weather came in. They were trapped and nearly frozen when a search party was sent after them. Dad said, “Most of us had to be carried out of there on stretchers. I was one of them, and so was that officer!” Dad suffered frost-bitten feet and had trouble with them the rest of his life. For his part, the officer was given an immediate transfer out of there for his own safety, and we hope, was busted to buck private.

On Amchitka, Dr. Boon reports that both he and Dad found themselves doing more extra work away from their band duties. There were regular stands at watch. “ We had to pull some guard duty for the balloons that the Japanese were sending over to try to set fire to the woods in Washington. One of them fell or was shot down on Amchitka. It was kept under lock and key.”

### **DON'T BE THAT WAY: The Battle of Attu**

There were bloody battles and battles of nerves on the islands of Kiska, Adak, Kodiak, and especially Attu that continued as the war dragged on. “We were bombed and strafed in Dutch Harbor for two days. When that attack failed, the Japanese went to Attu. They stayed there till Roosevelt’s next election for president,” Boon remembered. That would have been Roosevelt’s fourth and final term. The Attu occupation by the Japanese, though not an immediate threat, was embarrassing to the Roosevelt administration and became a campaign issue. It was critical to that election that the Japanese be driven off of American soil. So they were, although it was costly.

Though our father and his compatriots were no part of it, an amphibious landing commenced against the Japanese on Attu on May 11, 1943. Although the Navy was charged with getting the fighting force there, most of the fighting was done by Army and Marine assault troops. Many of men charged with taking the island were new recruits from the California bases. They were sent to the Aleutians in warm weather gear, wholly unsuited to the climate they had to fight in. A good many men suffered from frostbite from slogging through the water and the muskeg; gangrene set in and many had to have toes amputated. (USN Combat Narrative)

It took the better part of the month to secure the island for the Americans and to rout the Japanese, who nearly fought to the last man. The final count was 2351 Japanese killed and only 28 prisoners, with no officers taken. The U.S. forces assumed that more were killed and already buried by the time they got there and accounted for the dead. (USN Combat Narrative)

It was no picnic for the Americans, which reported 3829 casualties: 549 killed, 1148 injured, 1200 with cold injuries, 614 sick, and the others with miscellaneous injuries. That was 25% of the U.S. fighting force on the island.

There were several frightening naval engagements between the U. S. and Japan among the Aleutian Islands. Our father did not take part as a combatant in any of those engagements. But Japanese submarines patrolled the Aleutians throughout the war, menacing anyone and everyone who inhabited the island chain.

All reports of submarine, ship, or plane sightings were taken seriously. One such report, which woke everyone up, turned out to be a false alarm, according to Dr. Boon.

After the Japanese had taken Attu and were well established, the word came down that they were sending landing parties to make raids. They came on subs, landed in rubber boats, shot things up and left. Also the sub might come in the harbor and use its deck guns to shell the harbor. The Navy then installed a sub net across the harbor.

Shortly thereafter at about 2:00 a.m. there was a general alarm that a sub had set off the alarm on the sub net. All hands charged out to man the guns and the Navy raced out to drop depth charges.

About daylight a dead whale floated up, still caught in the sub net, and proceeded to create a pervasive stench for at least ten days---but no sign of Japs or subs.  
(Boon letter)

### **TAKE THE “A” TRAIN: Going Home**

Then in early May 1945, with the War in Europe over and the War in the Pacific grinding down, it was announced that soldiers who had accumulated 120 combat points could go back to the States and be discharged. (Boon, Goldstein and Dillon)

“So we elected to do that,” Dr. Boon reported. I can only imagine how my father felt that day knowing that he soon would be home again in Arkansas, a place he left after that only under duress.

For Dr. Boon’s part, he must have been very excited, because although he has total recall of nearly every other event concerning him and our father, he does not remember if they traveled together back to the States or how Bob Johnson might have gotten there. He knows that they both had enough points to leave., and believes that they started back in about May of 45.

Boon said, “Again we had to hitch rides and had to find our own transport. I got a plane to Adak. I went there and pulled my first day of KP. I was only a Buck Sergeant and was out-ranked by everybody. Then I got a freight plane to Anchorage and another to Edmonton, Canada. I believe that we traveled together until we arrived at Edmonton. Then it was every man for himself. I stayed there and waited for orders to continue. That’s when I took the train to Minnesota and another to Ft. Smith where I was discharged. I rode the bus home.”

As for his reception on returning home, Dr. Boon says simply, “My father and mother were happy to see me.”

Although we don't know for sure what route Bob Johnson's took on his final return from the Aleutians, it's a pretty safe bet that it followed Bobby Boon's closely. He certainly would have tried to catch a plane to avoid those ships and the sea-sickness that plagued him. And we do have that slip of paper from Wald-Chamberlain Field in Minneapolis, Minnesota dated July 3, stating that a train seat was reserved for him. It also routed him through Ft. Smith before he was given a bus ticket home as a free man.

He had gone into the service a boy. He came out a man, in every way imaginable. He was seasoned, he was a little taller and had added a couple of pounds. He had lost some of his black, curly hair (He believed it was because he never took off his cap the whole time he was there because his head was cold). He had shouldered responsibility, some of it heavy. His face was weathered. Most of all, he had experienced combat. It all showed in his face and body language in the yellowing photographs.

During his war years, Bob Johnson was careful with his money. He sent his monthly allotment, \$15 at first, back to his parents for safe-keeping. They put it in the bank. Bob told his father, Floyd, that he wanted Floyd to be on the lookout for a business opportunity for the two of them. Floyd wrote him about a store that was available. Mr. Hoyle was selling his store in town. Would Bob be interested in going into business with his dad in a grocery store/meat market? Why yes, he believed he would. (Johnson)

Floyd Johnson made the deal after he talked with Mr. Hoyle and Hoyle told him, "Mr. Johnson, I guarantee you that by the end of the year, you'll be making twice what you're making now." Floyd thought that sounded good enough to support him, Beadie, and Bob. We know that the store was purchased before Bob's letter dated July '44, because he mentions coming home to work in it.

Bob Johnson was not the only soldier who did not blow his small check on poker games and beer. Sgt. Bob Boon also saved his \$15 monthly allotment. His intention was to go back to college and get his degree. He was able to do that with the \$1800 that he put in Col. Robertson's bank back home.

After taking his degree in chemistry and abandoning an attempt to farm with his father, Bob Boon returned to the University of Arkansas to become a pre-med major. There he met his wife, Eloise. They married and decided that he would apply to medical school. Eloise supported them as a public school teacher until he completed the University of Arkansas Medical School on the GI Bill and was able to set up a practice, settling in Huntsville, Alabama.. Dr. Boon kept his toe in military waters until he retired as a captain in the Air Force Reserves in January 1957. He enjoyed flying and had his own place for many years.

## **IT'S BEEN A LONG, LONG TIME: BACK HOME**

Readjustment to civilian can be very difficult, even if one hates being in the military. “When you’ve been having someone tell you what to do every day, you suddenly realize “My God, I’ve got to do this on my own!” Dr. Boon stated.

We don’t know how hard it was for our father to readjust. When Bob got home he told Beadie and Floyd that he figured he’d need at least six weeks to get his civilian legs back under him. (Johnson) “I just need to hunt and fish for a while,” he told them. Bob told Stephanie that his parents agreed to give him the time to readjust. These days that would be called time to decompress.

Bob laughed when he said, “I hunted and fished all I could stand for two weeks, then I went to Dad and told him to give me something to do. I’ve been working ever since.”

His musical training and experience didn’t go to waste either. His mother, Beadie, and her sister, Sue Oxner, put their heads and considerable organizational talents together and decided that Marianna High School needed a band. And that is what happened. Beadie and Sue also convinced the powers that be that Bob was needed as its first director. In addition to his store duties, he directed the band on a voluntary basis for about a year until a permanent director could be found.

As handsome and personable a man as he was, it is not hard to imagine him attracting female attention when he returned home. Men had been in short supply for several years. When they began coming home, the Great Pairing-Off began. Courtships were short. People got married in record numbers. The Baby Boom began.

Our father was no different. The story of his and our mother’s brief courtship follows our mother’s story. The men who fought in that war obviously learned many life lessons during their service. Bob Johnson took many of those lessons to heart and passed as many as he could down to his children and grandchildren. But never did we hear the message that Dr. Boon claims was the one thing he learned from his military service, “Never volunteer for anything.”

## SHIRLEY ALLEN'S WAR

Mother did her part too. Shirley Eloise Allen was a bright and energetic girl. She grew up the oldest of four girls, daughters of Willie Mae (Bill) and George Allen. She shared chores around the house with her sisters Sue, George Ann, and Lanell. Shirley preferred the outdoor work and was assigned to chop wood. When her children were growing up, they could never talk her into getting a fireplace. She did not see the romance in it.

George Allen, her father, was a logger and farmer. Mammy was a housewife and often worked outside the home as a clerk in one of the downtown stores. While our father was risk averse our mother was drawn to risk. One might say that it was in her genes, for her father brought home extra money with gambling. Her mother, Bill, told a grandchild once, "We would have starved to death during the Depression if it hadn't been for your Big Daddy's (George) gambling."

But family pictures show a happy family, with smiling little girls dressed up in nice clothes, either made by Bill Allen or store-bought by her sister, Edith. Edith didn't have children till later and she doted on her nieces.

In high school Shirley was a top athlete, captaining the girls' basketball team, participating in both junior high and senior high basketball, picking up All District honors as a forward, and being a cheerleader for the boy's teams. She never got over the cheerleading part.

Her last few years of high school she surprised even herself by coming into her own as a student. She was named to the National Honor Society. She once told Stephanie that it was one of the most surprising moments of her life, because she had some truly brilliant classmates (Charles West, Mary Jane Shoffet, and others), and she didn't place herself among the smarter kids. This surprise to her was despite being a voracious reader and a polite youngster who was respectful in class. She tried to listen. I suspect that her earlier lack of shining in the classroom was due to a tendency to let her attention wander, probably due to undiagnosed hyperactivity in the lower grades.

But she was smart enough that college was not out of the question. Her parents expected that she would attend college upon her high school graduation. This is fairly remarkable because college attendance was not nearly the norm at the time. Plus, neither of her parents was highly educated. Bill, or Willie Mae, completed tenth grade at T. A. Futrall in Marianna. George's formal education stopped after eighth grade. But both of them were intelligent people and they obviously respected higher education. They wanted the best for their daughters, all of whom George said were "perfect."

## **HOW YA GONNA KEEP 'EM DOWN ON THE FARM?: Leaving Home**

Their attitude was even more notable because Shirley graduated from T. A. Futrall in 1943, near the end of the Great Depression when there was little money for extras like higher education. Compounding factors were the fact the three younger Allen girls were still to be raised. Also, George had recently gone back into his first choice of profession, farming. Times were tight and if farming was a quick road to anything, it was bankruptcy.

Still, when Shirley approached her mother and father after graduation and told them that she didn't want to go to college right then, Bill and George were surprised. George was aghast. Shirley's closest in age sister, Sue (later to become Holman), told Stephanie in a recent phone conversation that she remembered the situation well. Many of the young men in Shirley's graduating class joined the services upon graduation and others were drafted. Edward "Possum" Christensen, later Shirley's brother-in-law, was drafted straight after his graduation, only a few years after Shirley's completed high school. Plus, several young women Shirley knew were moving to places with defense industries to make their contributions to the war effort.

Of the big decision, Sue said that Shirley went to her parents one evening. "Shirley told them that she wanted to go to college eventually, but that right then she felt that she should take part in the war effort. She also said that her going off to school would put too much strain on the family," Sue said. "Daddy wanted her to go straight to school. If she had, she would have had her degree or been close to it by the time the war was over and she met your dad. But Mother stepped in and said, 'George, if this is what she wants to do....She wants to do this for her country and for herself. I do believe that she will go to school.'"

Sue added that the stipulation from the parents was that Shirley would have to live with Bill Allen's mother, Sudie, Shirley's grandmother. Shirley and her sisters called their mother "Mother," and their grandmother "Mama." The next generation referred to Sudie Belew, their great-grandmother as "Mama Belew." Sudie Belew lived in Memphis with her second husband, Henry Belew. They lived in a just-purchased duplex on Stonewall, right across the street from Sudie's other daughter from her first marriage to Dyke Edwards, Edith Coats. (Holman) It was a cozy arrangement until Sudie died at the age of 102.

Sudie and Henry had a daughter named Laura Elizabeth, a much-married woman who died in her forties. Laura and one of her earlier husbands, a man named Bill, were then living in Biloxi, Mississippi where they both worked in the ship-building industry. Henry Belew, a plasterer by trade, had moved to New Orleans temporarily to also build ships. The Depression had not been good to the building trades or any other kind of trade, and everybody who could get a job somewhere immediately ran to get one when they started opening up.



So Sudie had a house for a granddaughter to share. Bill and George insisted that they would overlook their misgivings ONLY if Shirley moved in with her grandmother. Sue said, “Shirley wasn’t bad to run around and get in trouble, but she was an attractive young woman. Mother and Daddy just felt that she would be safe if she lived at Mama’s house. I know she dated a little when she was over there, but not much. Mostly she worked”

### **AIN’T MISBEHAVING: Working at the Army Depot**

Shirley made her way to Memphis and found work at the Army Depot. Sue isn’t sure, but thinks that their aunt, Edith, may have been able to help Shirley find a job. At the time Edith was working for the Corps of Engineers in Memphis and would have had an inside track on helping a relative find government-related work. Plus, anyone who ever knew Aunt Edith Coats knows that she would have gone through hell and high water to help out one of her nieces, especially if it meant that she would be living across the street from her. This may not be what Shirley originally had in mind, but she went off to Memphis with a sense of adventure and patriotic fervor.

The Memphis Army Depot was no small thing. It was a complex of 103 buildings, mostly warehouses connected by 26 miles of railroad track and 25 miles of road. Its purpose was to supply the military with every thing it could possibly need, with the exception of weapons and munitions. (Finger)

In 1941 *The Commercial Appeal* announced plans for the depot and estimated that it would cover 25,000,000 square feet and would cost \$12,500, 000 to build. A 550 acre tract off Airways Boulevard near the Frisco Railroad Yard was selected as the spot. (Maxwell) When completed it covered 642 acres. (Finger)

The paper tried to put the size of the project into perspective in a way that its readers could understand. It said: “It will be big enough for 16 major league baseball teams to play 8 games simultaneously...with 30,000 fans at each game and room left over for several football games.” (Maxwell)

Plans also called for room to hold 1,000 rail freight cars, since most of the supplies would have to be transported by rail. By January of 1942 , with only 55% of it completed, it opened after only six months of construction. Before final construction was finished plans were drawn to add on. The depot closed in 1997.

Its dedication ceremony took place on April 1, 1942. It was officially named the Memphis Quartermaster Depot. The first call for civilian workers other than construction people was for 1,800 clerical workers. Ten thousand people applied. The Depression was over, but good jobs, especially government jobs, were at a premium. (Maxwell) There was a branch of the Army Depot off Jackson Avenue and it is possible that Shirley may

have also worked there. It was closer to where she resided with her grandmother.

The employees of the Army Depot evidently considered themselves patriots as well as employees. Most of them, like Shirley Allen, were there to help in the war effort. A case in point is when many civilian employees started a movement to refuse overtime pay. And there was considerable overtime to be made. Federal law required that overtime pay be offered, but legally it could be refused and often was out of simple patriotism. In an attempt to avoid breaking its own laws, the government had to get creative. They built a beauty shop at the depot and allowed the women during slack times to clock out and go get their hair and nails done. (Maxwell)

At its peak strength in June 1943 the Depot had 4,726 civilian and 162 military personnel. (Finger) It obviously was a boon the Memphis economy. The Depot had a chemical warfare and Corps of Engineers study section. It was not without grim reminders of what happens in war. Part of the depot space was given over to the American Graves Registry Service Distribution for Deceased Veterans, which held the returned remains of the area's war dead. (Maxwell)

What secrets did the depot hold? What items passed through its doors? It handled all of the food coming from the Mid-South growers...the meat, produce, dairy, and vegetables. Dehydrated foods were stored. Space devoted to coffee, coffee roasting, blending, and packaging was estimated to allow for 1 million cups of coffee daily. This last item would have been of great interest to my mother, a certified coffee fiend.

Army shoes, mess kits, parachutes, first aid kits, belts, and fatigues came through there. Floating bridges and camouflage equipment also were stored. At one point 8 crates of dogs were brought through. Late in the war part of the depot housed a prisoner of war camp, mostly holding captured German soldiers.(Maxwell)

Shirley Allen worked as a clerk and later as an office worker. She told Stephanie that she did light typing in an office as part of her job. Sue believes that she mostly clerked in the supply depot. Sue doesn't not know what sort of supplies. Shirley didn't discuss any of that with the family, obviously on direction from the Army, but at one time many years after the war she did mention something about "parachutes."

Sue relates, "She couldn't talk about it. You know the old saying, 'Loose lips sink ships.' Shirley was very tight-lipped anyway. I'd come in and tell everything. Not Shirley, She never did anything bad, but we'd go out and she'd tell me not to tell Mother and Daddy anything about it because 'they didn't need to know.' Well, she sure was like that about her job. She told us it was all 'Hush-Hush.'"

She would have made a good spy if she ever could have developed a poker face. Unlike her poker playing father, one could read everything she was thinking by watching her face.

Part of Shirley's plan was to save any money she made for college. This couldn't have been easy, because she had to pay Mama Belew room and board (though Sue figures that she probably only paid toward groceries), and of course, there were clothes to be bought. Shirley Allen was a clothes horse.

"She bought some beautiful clothes. She didn't get to come home very often because it was too expensive, but when she did come she'd bring these lovely clothes and she'd let me wear them," Sue stated. "I remember this one thing she had, a gorgeous yellow coat. She offered to let me wear it to a party and she wore mine. Sometimes I'd be going somewhere with friends or on a date and Shirley would say "This will look good on you; why don't you wear it?"

Her family obviously was of tremendous importance to Shirley and she was sensitive to its needs. She once related a painful episode regarding her days of working in Memphis. She said that she had to work overtime at the depot on the run-up to Christmas. Everyone had been given Christmas off, but had to be back at work the next morning. This would have been in 1943, at the very height of the war. It meant that she wouldn't be able to go home for Christmas to be with her family, although Memphis is only 50 miles from Marianna. The roads were not very good then, gasoline was scarce, she didn't have a car, and all train tickets had been booked.

She started Christmas morning feeling miserable, homesick, and crying. Then she decided to take a chance and went to the train station (probably hitched a ride with Aunt Edith). Still, no tickets were to be had. Her disappointment must have shown on her face, because a rail worker told her that if she was willing to ride in the baggage car, she would be allowed to do that. So she climbed aboard the baggage car, found a mail bag to sit on and rode in the unheated car to Marianna. She walked several blocks home, surprising and thrilling her family, just in time for Christmas dinner.

When telling that story, she seemed very proud of herself for taking charge of the situation and taking the risk. She felt that it was worth it. It seemed to be a pivotal point in her life.

### **BOOMER SOONER: College Life**

After working at the Army Depot for nearly a year, she moved back home for a short time and finished planning to attend the University of Oklahoma in Norman, Oklahoma. Shirley had some friends, Ollie Mae Kilpatrick and Ruth Marie Snider, who already attended there and they were probably the key in her decision to go there. Bill and George tried to convince her to go closer, to the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville, but she told them, "That's just a social school." Years later she laughed when saying, "So instead I went to the biggest social school in the country."

She packed her trunk and rode the train out west to Oklahoma. She remembered it as being a long way and the farthest she'd ever been away from home.

OU was noted for its football team and its rich social life. Shirley moved into one of the girl's dorms at first, but by second semester had pledged Alpha Xi Delta. Oklahoma campuses had been raided of its college men, just like every other campus in the nation, but the girls still managed to find occasional dates. They kept up their sorority social calendar in spite of the dearth of eligible men. There were teas, special dinners, and other activities to keep the young women busy when they weren't in class.

Shirley declared Physical Education as her major, but claimed later that the heavy emphasis on science courses made her fret that she might not be able to finish with that major. She did well in English courses and enjoyed writing and might have changed her major to English. (as one of her daughters did) if she had completed her degree.

When she returned home after that one year of college, she found that family fortunes were not great. George, who could nearly always make a crop, had a crop failure. He tried to reassure Shirley that she would be able to return to school in the fall, that he would borrow money for that purpose. Shirley refused. She told him that she had worked to save for college before and that she'd do it again.

### **I'LL BE WITH YOU IN APPLE BLOSSOM TIME: The Waiting Game**

Shirley got a job working at Turner Drug Store at the corner of Main and Poplar in downtown Marianna and was working there as a clerk. Cliff and Annie Williams were either dating seriously or had recently married. Cliff was an old school friend of Bob's and a recently returned vet from both the Aleutian and European Theaters. Annie was a friend of Shirley's.

One evening in October Cliff and Annie Louise decided they wanted to go to a night club in Forrest City. They invited Bob. He was tired after a busy work day and begged off, saying that he was too fatigued and besides, he didn't want to go without a date. Annie insisted that it was not a problem (sounds like a set-up to me). He should ask Shirley Allen, they said. Annie thought she'd go.

It evidently was not a hard sell. Bob Johnson was well-known around town, a handsome, slightly older (by seven years) Army veteran. Bob remembered Shirley as a girl around his youngest sister Floyd's age. She was a cute basketball player at the time, before he left for his military service. When asked about their "blind date" years later, Dad would smile and say, "I didn't know her, but I knew who she was." And then he'd raise and lower his eyebrows like Groucho Marx.

Bob asked Shirley to double-date with him, Cliff and Annie. She accepted and that was the end of that. They hit it off. Mother talked years later of “how handsome your Daddy was.” Daddy said about Mother, “I couldn’t hardly think of anything else.” Halfway through November they were engaged. By December 30 they were married. Their marriage lasted until his death November 18, 1998, just six weeks shy of 53 years.

There were four children and nine grand-children that they nurtured and loved in between those years. They traveled to every continent except Antarctica. Mother lived for it. Dad endured it. But even though Shirley had a sister and nieces living in Alaska for many years, neither of them ever vacationed in Alaska. Bob had gotten a good look at Alaska. And he knew that sometimes you go somewhere for a lark and wind up having to stay. He had no intention of taking that chance again.

Both of our parents were pillars of the community. There was a business to run. There was work to be done for the PTA, the Lion’s Club, and the Wesleyan Guild. There was Little League to coach, Brownies and Cub Scouts to lead, a community swimming pool to build, kids to raise. Eventually there were grandchildren to watch dance and play ball.

Neither of our parents ever quite got the hang of never volunteering for anything, though I’m sure there were times when that might have sounded good to them. Neither Bob nor Shirley Johnson would say that they had done anything extraordinary in their lives. That would be one of their rare mistakes. Our family, community, and nation would be poorer without their determination to help the country through those war years. Their sure guidance proved necessary for the years afterward. They were just two of the people who made up a truly committed generation. We were lucky to have them.

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