

**Interview with Harold R. Johnston
with son John Harold Johnston**

July 30, 2008, Conway, Arkansas

Interviewed by David Elmore, Arkansas Educational Television Network
Transcribed by Professional Transcripts

This interview was conducted by the Arkansas Educational Television Network (AETN) under AETN's World War II Oral History Project, In Their Words. The interview, along with a second interview done by NPS in 2013, have been added to the NPS Aleutian World War II National Historic Area oral history project files with permission of Harold Johnston and David Elmore. The interview with Harold Johnston was recorded with his permission on a video camera. Copies of the video file and a separate audio file are preserved in mp3, wav and wma formats and are on file at the offices of the National Park Service in Anchorage, Alaska.

The transcript has been lightly edited.

(The dictation starts out with dialog regarding AETN, the State archives and the logistics of the interview.)

0:00:56.0 Greetings and introductions

David Elmore:because eventually this tape and the records of our project are going to end up in the State Archives and they are going to want know who all was present when this was done. So what we usually do at the beginning, after I do the preliminaries, is we go around the room and have everybody say who they are and what their relation is to the veteran that is being interviewed. But first off, let me open up by saying that this is AETN's World War II Oral History Project, *In Their Words*, and we're interviewing Mr. Harold Johnston today, here at our studios, in Studio D at AETN. Today is Wednesday, July 30, 2008. My name is David Elmore and I'll be conducting the interview today and if you would, tell me your name and how you're related to him.

Johnny Johnston: John Harold Johnston. I'm his son.

David Elmore: Wonderful. And sir, if you would tell me your name and where you live.

Harold Johnston: I'm Harold R. Johnston. I live at 8108 Barrett in Roland, Arkansas. It's just outside of Little Rock. It's closer to Little Rock than it is to Roland, but -- we've lived there thirty-some years. We moved down to Little Rock after World War II and I worked on the Little Rock Fire Department thirty-one years and retired from there. I was a captain in '76. I've been retired thirty-two years. (laughs)

David Elmore: Wonderful. That is great. Also, before we get too deep into this, I need to start -- to let you know, as well, that if at any time during the interview you need to take a break and get up and stretch your legs or go to the restroom or get a drink of

water, anything like that, you tell me. I'll stop the camera and we'll let you go do that. Also, if we get into territory that is a little sensitive or something that you just flat out don't want to talk about, you tell me, I'll go on to the next question.

Harold Johnston: Okay.

David Elmore: Now, we start the interview off by getting a little bit of what life was like right before the war, during the last part of the days of the Depression. And the war was already going on in Europe and Asia.....

Harold Johnston: Um-hmm, yeah.

0:03:26.3 Life in Dardanelle, Arkansas, before the war

David Elmore: And we always want to know a little bit about what life was like in Arkansas back then, or where you were living at that time, and how you found out about the war before Pearl Harbor. Tell us a little bit about that.

Harold Johnston: Well, I lived a mile and a half out of Dardanelle, on a farm. And that's -- I was raised on that farm out there at Johnston Hill. And I worked on the farm, went to school in Dardanelle, and I'd read in the paper about the war. Where they invaded -- well, over there -- the countries. The first one, I can't even remember that. My memory is (laughs) not too well. But it was Poland, I think. But I was -- worked on the NYA back then. You know, that was kind of like the WPA, but it was for kids. I had just finished high school and I was working at that, and we built tennis courts there in Dardanelle and was building a school and gymnasium over at Ola. We just worked a couple of days a week, you know, the NYA boys. That was to give us a little money and learn a trade in something; something to do.

David Elmore: That -- that's wonderful, because we talk a little about, sometimes, some of the programs that President Roosevelt acted -- enacted during the Depression years.

Harold Johnston: Um-hmm.

David Elmore: And we know about the WPA and the CCC's.....

Harold Johnston: Yeah.

David Elmore: But we have -- haven't spoken to any veterans yet that have -- that have told us that they were in the NYA and that was the -- what was that standing -- what did that stand for?

Harold Johnston: National Youth Administration.

David Elmore: Okay.

Harold Johnston: That's what it was. They asked me if I wanted to go to the CCC's, but I didn't want to, so I stayed at home and we went -- it was hard times then, of course. I don't -- my dad farmed and we raised most of what we ate and all that.

David Elmore: Well, thank you for telling us that, because we like to get an idea of what life was like right before the war. And so now we're up to the big question that we always ask veterans. Where were you and what were you doing on December 7, 1941, when Pearl Harbor was attacked?

0:06:36.9 He learns of Pearl Harbor while at Camp Murray, Washington

Harold Johnston: Well, I was already in the Army. I went in in 1940, with Company F, 153rd Infantry. And we was at Camp Murray, Washington, out at Tacoma. It was a tent city. It was a National Guard Camp originally, I think. But we was stationed there when the Japs hit Pearl Harbor. I was there in the camp. It was on Sunday, you know, morning, and somebody came and told us. It was -- but that's where I was, in camp there. But some of the regiment was already at home on leave. Half of them -- I mean, half of the company -- came home first, and of course, I was in the second half, naturally. And they called them to come back. They hadn't called for me and I already had a car and had it to come home when they came back. We was getting twenty-one days furlough and we had a you-drive-them car. It was a new Buick. We paid \$30 dollars a piece on it and we had four guys going to ride with us to Arkansas. We was -- that was the way we was coming home. We didn't make it (laughs), because they cancelled our leave and we get -- we went and got our money back. The people were nice up there about it. You know, it being an Army base, the civilians and all.

David Elmore: Uh.....

Harold Johnston: But we.....

David Elmore: Oh.

0:08:37.0 Training maneuvers

Harold Johnston:had been at Camp Robinson. We went in in 1940, in December, and had been at Camp Robinson all those -- most of that year. We had been on Tennessee maneuvers, you know, and we got training the whole time, and fired on the rifle range and all that. I might mention that I was on the rifle range and I qualified as an expert and I was the only one in the company of one hundred and eighty men, and they told me that usually there was about three or four in each company; but I was the only one. And I also did it with a light machine gun. So at the reunion, sometimes, I would see someone I hadn't seen and he'd say, "Oh, you're the guy that fired expert with everything." (Laughs)

David Elmore: Now.....

Harold Johnston: But I don't -- I don't know what else you'd want to know.

David Elmore: Well, I'm going to.....

Harold Johnston: What.....

David Elmore:go ahead in that.

Harold Johnston: We had.....

David Elmore: While you was.....

Harold Johnston: We went on.....

David Elmore: Oh, I'm sorry.

Harold Johnston:Tennessee maneuvers, and in the National Guard -- went in in '39 -- we went to Minnesota maneuvers too. They were getting ready for the war, I guess.

David Elmore: So you -- by the time you got to Tacoma, Washington, you'd been pretty -- pretty much trained on just about.....

Harold Johnston: Yeah.

David Elmore:everything.

Harold Johnston: Yeah. We was trained in the Guard, but we took a boot camp -- the same thing as at Camp Robinson, and then we got some recruits to train -- replace, so to bring us up to a hundred and eighty. So we trained them. We had cadre -- you know, to train them everyday. But we was training, that's what we was doing.

David Elmore: Wonderful. Now up there in Camp Tacoma, on that day when you heard about Pearl Harbor being attacked, and in the next following days, what was the kind of talk among the men and scuttlebutt going around camp about what had just happened and where Pearl Harbor was and all that? Give us an idea of what people were talking about.

0:11:22.5 Heading to Alaska

Harold Johnston: Well, most of our regiment was already up in Alaska on -- some of them on Annette Island. The whole regiment -- they just split us up later. But some of them -- the 2nd Battalion and 3rd Battalion, they was on about three or four places on the mainland. I don't know where all. I've read since. But we was just wondering where

we was going. We was waiting to go up there, but they started blackout and all that on the West Coast and they was expecting the Japs to maybe attack us.

But first, they sent us to an airbase there. I can't remember the name of it, but I know it, but -- we was guarding it and I was assigned on a weapons carrier. It had a machine gun on it. I was in the machine gun section. We would patrol around the airfield. Shifts at night and all. And we did that for a while. Some of them were on the gate, you know, checking the passes and all. But that's mostly what we was doing right there for a while and they -- they loaded up all of our gear and loaded it on a transport and within a month -- that was December the 7th -- well in January, we shipped out on the *St. Mihiel* -- you know, it was Navy. I think it had been a hospital ship in World War II, but -- I mean, World War I -- but we got on it and went up to -- we didn't know where we was going. We knew we was going to Alaska somewhere, but we went up the Inland Passage. I don't know whether you know what that is, but -- to stay out of the Pacific Ocean -- and we was on that about twenty-three days, I guess.

Ed Coffey and I worked in the first class petty officer's mess to get better food (laughs). We just worked in there to set up the tables and clean up afterwards. But we got to eat like the first class petty officers did. It was Navy on the ship and first class of the Army ate in there too. But we went up the Inland Passage and stopped in two or three ports in Alaska. And once we set in the harbor there for two or three days and the tide would go out and the ship would tilt some, you know, it was on the bottom. But anyhow, we went on and headed west and went out to Dutch Harbor. I don't know whether you've interviewed any from the 206th Coast Artillery.....

David Elmore: Yes, sir. We have.

0:15:09.2 Building a secret base on Umnak

Harold Johnston:but they was already there. And we stopped in the harbor there and stayed a night and we saw some of the guys from Russellville that we knew. But the next day, well, they took us out to the far end of the island. I guess it was the same island that Dutch Harbor was on the other end, but it was about eighty miles out there. And we went out to the end of the island. It was just barren and they put us off with pup tents the first night. That was in January, and it snowed the first night. When I woke up the next morning, snow was in the pup tent; it was open on one end. So they brought some tents on board -- off of the ship and we set them up. They was 16 X 16 parameter little tents, so we was out of the weather. And we ran the caribou off down to the base there. I mean, it was just a bare island.

We was going to build an airfield there and that was a suitable place. But over -- the harbor wasn't any -- there wasn't any harbor there, so -- oh, I forget now -- around the island, on the other side. I can't remember the name, but there was a harbor there and ships and they'd load them on barges and bring them over there. So they started bringing us runway steel -- you know, sections -- to us. And there was a second battalion of 153rd there and F Company was assigned to unloading the barges whenever they'd come in, they'd notify us and we send a detail down and unload the

steel. I think each piece weighed sixty-something pounds and we started carrying two, you know, to get it through quicker. And we'd load it on the trailer. The trailer had tracks on it and the bulldozer. We had some engineers that went in with us and they'd haul it up there about -- I guess about a mile -- to where the airbase level place and they'd doze some.

E Company was originally from Clarksville, Arkansas. They was laying the runway steel and they'd put it together and drive little keepers in to keep it from coming apart where it fit together. But we did that and that was hard work and a lot of it. But we didn't have much to eat either, but a lot of C rations; that's all we had then. Later, we got K rations, when we was out at Adak. But the -- it was rough weather. They said the temperature was from ten to seventy-five or something year around, but it was the Bering Sea on one side and the Pacific on the other and it was -- they called them williwaw storms; we had them all the time. And we had special clothes, parkas with hoods and all that, but -- anyhow, we worked till up in May.

Of course, some of the company was building some Quonset huts. And we dug them in -- dug them in the ground and set them about this deep before we put them up in there. So we got in the Quonset huts finally and built a mess hall and -- we was just building this base up. We was in the infantry, but some of us was supposed to be protecting it, too. It was out on the beach. But we was doing the best we could. We was Arkansas boys mostly, but -- most of the draftees we got, a big part of them was from Arkansas too. But there was some from the North.

But we got the thing built in March and we just -- we got about twelve, fifteen P-40's come in and landed. They had been there about a week and it was the 3rd or 4th of June, I think it was, when they bombed Dutch Harbor up there. And they didn't know we was out there. But George K. White, from Pine Bluff, and I was out on the beach at that time in a dugout thing with a light machine gun aimed out straight there between us and the next island. I saw our planes start taking off, off that runway over from us, in a big hurry and when they got over the water, they dropped their wing tanks. They had a reserve tank on the tip of each wing for long range. They were dropping them and I told him, I said, "Something's going on there. They're dropping their wing tanks." (Laughs) And sure enough, we looked up the beach and saw these Zeroes coming. There was about a dozen of them. He and I had a ring side seat for the dogfight to head out there.

David Elmore: Tell us about that.

0:22:50.6 The Japanese find the secret base

Harold Johnston: Well, they was just going up and down and around, shooting and all. Of course, we just had that light machine gun aimed out, so we got up in the trench that led down into it and was watching it. And most of the time, it was a quarter of a mile or a half mile in front of us. But they really mixed it up and we saw about six planes go down; all of them would go into the water. One pilot bailed out and landed on this next

island over there. Later on, after they fought the Japs off and they left -- they was returning from hitting Dutch Harbor the second day -- that's when they hit us. But they didn't -- we lost two pilots, I think, two planes, and that pilot was an American that they picked up over us, so we just lost one pilot. The Japs went on back to the carriers or wherever and they'd found our secret base anyhow. And anyhow, they hit Dutch Harbor, so -- I don't know why they did, but they landed a few hundred miles on west, on Kiska and Attu. That was the end of that, because they didn't come back anymore.

So we kept on training and -- they got some bombers in and they'd go down there and bomb them and come back and they was losing planes from the weather as much as they was from the Japs.

But we was on Umnak a little over a year because we went in about the first of February and my birthday is the 8th. The way I remember is I had two birthdays on Umnak. So we was there just a little over a year and they got us up and we had a mess hall and a movie theater and all built and -- but they moved us to Adak, another bare island, about seven hundred miles, I think, to get us out there closer. But we moved out there and there was some troops already there, but there wasn't much else, and we built us another -- Quonset huts and all. And we was there, helping unload ships and they'd have us signed out to different things. Part of the time, I drove a truck, hauling bombs and everything else off of the dock. But they was sending planes from there to bomb Kiska and Attu, so we was there for a few months. Let's see, in -- yeah, in '43, wasn't it, when they went and took Attu?

David Elmore: I think so.

Harold Johnston: Yeah.

David Elmore: I'm not sure myself either.

Harold Johnston: I've got it down here, but -- I wrote out a bunch of stuff while I could remember. But I thought maybe you'd read it off.....

David Elmore: Oh.

Harold Johnston:from that and ask me questions from it.

David Elmore: Oh. Yes, sir. (Laughs)

Harold Johnston: But I didn't know what to expect.

David Elmore: Well, I apologize. But you did -- you actually told us a very good sequence there, because.....

Harold Johnston: Yeah.

David Elmore:we don't -- we talked to the gentleman that was in the 206th Artillery, but we hadn't ever talked to anybody from the Airborne who went up and did that part, so we're very.....

Harold Johnston: Well, I was in the Airborne later.

David Elmore: Oh, okay.

Harold Johnston: Yeah.

David Elmore: But you were in the five -- third -- five.....

Harold Johnston: I was in the 153rd infantry.

David Elmore: Hundred and fifty-third. Okay.

Harold Johnston: Yeah.

David Elmore: That's what it was. I'm sorry. Yes sir (*whispering aside*)

Harold Johnston: And then the Airborne.....

David Elmore: Oh, okay.

Harold Johnston: We.....

David Elmore: Well, before -- excuse me. Before we get to the Airborne, let me ask you about the 503rd that you were in. Where was that based at? Where was that located?

Harold Johnston: The 502nd?

David Elmore: I mean the -- I'm sorry. Yes, the -- what am I -- I'm getting confused here, as to.....

Harold Johnston: Yeah.

David Elmore:into places. Tell us where.....

0:28:19.8 Japanese prisoners taken to San Diego

Harold Johnston: Well, I came and got in that in -- I was up in the islands for twenty-seven months. We went to Kiska, too, after Attu. But we missed out on Attu. That's where all the fighting was. They sent our regiment later to Kiska, but when they went in on Attu -- and I think it lasted a couple of weeks -- but we got -- they brought twenty-two

Jap prisoners. That's all they took, out of that whole thing. They brought them back and assigned them to F Company to guard. But they had part of a rifle company guarding them in the hut with barbed wire around it for two or three weeks until they got them on a ship and brought them back to San Diego. We sent a five man detail with them to guard them. Of course, I wasn't one of them either. (*Laughs*) But they came back and got a leave and then they came back up there and brought us some liquor and whiskey back with them. But.....

David Elmore: What happened on -- after on there, on Kiska? Is that what happened on Kiska?

Harold Johnston: No, that was on Attu.

David Elmore: Attu. I'm sorry.

0:29:51.8 The Japanese slip away from Kiska

Harold Johnston: Where all the fighting was. After that, they got us together and gave us some more training on climbing the ropes to get on a boat and on and off into the landing barges and took us -- so they invaded Kiska. Had three or four battleships shelling it and everything else. We went down there and there wasn't a Jap on the island. We didn't know it. They'd slipped out. They said there was submarines and all. But they took their hand weapons and all, I didn't get anything there. I got a couple of blankets and something like that, Jap blankets. But they was mostly in tunnels they had dug back in the hills. But there was a good force there. But they had slipped out. But we went in and landed. And the first night -- we didn't even know it, but we had lead hills where we went on and we was sitting there all night and there was shooting going on. But this mountain infantry outfit from the States was there too, and they had a bunch of Canadian troops, too. But what they was doing was shooting each other -- mostly the patrol they'd send out. We sent out some patrols and they couldn't find anything and they had passwords. They'd come back and we didn't shoot. (*Laughs*) But anyhow, they lost about thirty men and there wasn't a Jap on the island. But they found out the next day. So we went on up there and there was a bombed out ship in the harbor. The Japanese had been there for some time. And many submarines on the beach. There wasn't all that many buildings. They had an airstrip built and some seaplanes, but they took all the hand weapons with them. But we took Kiska anyhow and they sent us right back to Adak and we went back to the same huts we left from. We was back there, unloading ships and working in different things.

David Elmore: How long did you stay there before you moved on?

0:32:49.7 Heading back to the States

Harold Johnston: We stayed there until April of '44. We had been up there twenty-seven months and they moved us back to the States. We went with the ship to Prince Rupert, Canada, and got off and stayed there about a week. Trying to civilize us, I

guess, and give us some military courtesy and all. (*Laughter*) We got on a train and went to Hattiesburg, Mississippi, to -- what was that.....

Johnny Johnston: Camp Shelby.

David Elmore: Camp Shelby.

Harold Johnston: Camp Shelby. And got a furlough to come home. When we came back, they reassigned us all to different bases around the country. I.....

David Elmore: Excuse me; I'm going to interrupt you here before we head further. Tell us a little bit about what furlough in the middle of a war was like to a guy who had been out there in it.

0:33:54.8 Home on furlough during the war

Harold Johnston: Oh, we went home, you know. We'd go into the honky-tonks at night, drinking whiskey or whatever we could get. (*Laughs*) Of course, we was glad to be home to see our family and all, but -- I didn't have a car then. My sister let me use their car. She was in Little Rock, working out at Jacksonville at the ordnance plant. All four of -- I had four sisters and no brothers, and at one time, they all four worked out there at the Jacksonville ordnance plant, making some kind of shells or bombs or something. I don't know. But it was good to be home.

David Elmore: Was it kind of hard to go back? After being out free for a little while, to have to go back?

0:34:57.8 Heading to Camp Hood to train recruits and then joining the paratroopers

Harold Johnston: Well, it was -- I was in the Army, so they sent me to Camp Hood, Texas, at the IRTC, the Infantry Replacement Training Center, to train new recruits and we'd get, you know, a whole company and give them thirteen weeks basic training. I thought they got good training, myself, than what we'd had, you know, twenty-seven months before. In the meantime, of course, we had M-1 rifles and all then and but -- we trained one cycle of thirteen weeks and the Airborne came through, you know, recruiting some of them to get them to volunteer for the paratroops. A buddy of mine, Buddy Garner, he wanted me to go with him, so we volunteered and they accepted us and took us. That was in the latter part of '44.

So I had a car by then. I'd bought a '41 Chevrolet. So I drove it to Fort Benning, Georgia. You know, they paid me some expenses, so I went to Fort Benning, Georgia, and took the parachute training. It was four weeks. You know, learning to pack chutes and jump out of a thirty-four foot tower and a two hundred and fifty foot tower and all

that. I made five jumps; one of them was a night jump. We jumped from eight hundred to a thousand feet; but in combat, they'd jump lower than that if they needed to. But it was rough training; I mean, they gave you -- you had to want in there. I was just hard-headed; I just thought I'd show them I can. But anyhow, I made it and got jump wings and we got another little furlough, and ours was at Christmas. You know, when we finished in '44. And we went back and they was assigning us all going overseas, you know. That's what we was trained for. That's what they was wanting anyhow, replacements.

And Garner and that whole bunch I trained with, they shipped out and I was red-lined, and I never did know what it was about. But I was there two or three more weeks and made another jump or two for some VIP's, you know, that had come. They was sitting up in the stands and we would jump late in the evening and go in on a plane and they'd shoot tracers over your head. There wasn't nothing to it, but -- I finally got assigned to -- shipped out to -- the first of the week, it'd go to California and the others would be going to Germany -- Europe. So I wound up going to Germany. I went to -- they sent us to -- where was that you took your basic -- I mean, on.....

Johnny Johnston: Fort Dix?

Harold Johnston:tanks?

Johnny Johnston: Huh? Fort Knox?

Harold Johnston: Yeah. They sent us up there and then they sent us to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey, and we got on a ship there to go to Germany.

0:39:46.6 Heading to Germany

David Elmore: And the war was still going on at this time?

Harold Johnston: Yeah.

David Elmore: Now.....

Harold Johnston: Yeah, that was right after -- that was right after -- oh, the 101st was the -- that battle in Belgium there.

Johnny Johnston: Bastogne.

David Elmore: Oh, in the.....

Johnny Johnston: No, the Bulge. The Battle of the Bulge.

Harold Johnston: After the Bulge.

David Elmore: Okay.

Harold Johnston: We stopped -- they stopped them. The 101st was cut off there at -- in Belgium.

David Elmore: Oh, at the city of Bastogne?

Harold Johnston: Yeah. Bastogne. *(Laughs)* See, I can't even remember some of the names like that. I'm going to have to see my doctor again, too, but..... *(Laughter)* But I guess I'm eighty-eight, so it's a.....

David Elmore: You got the right to lose a few memories. Well, you went in over there after that battle and -- but you left Camp Kilmer, New Jersey. Did you get to see the Lady Liberty as you passed through?

Harold Johnston: Yeah. We went right by it. We saw the Statue of Liberty.

David Elmore: What.....

Harold Johnston: There was.....

David Elmore: Tell us what was going through your mind when you saw the United States vanishing off behind you there and you were heading out, knowing you're going to go right smack in the battle.

0:41:12.3 His ship is damaged and heads to the Azores

Harold Johnston: Well, I didn't think much about it. I guess I wasn't smart enough to or something, but I'd volunteered to go over there. I wouldn't have had to go because I was there for the duration, training those recruits. But we saw the Statue of Liberty and it was forty ships in that convoy, going over.

We started out and about the second or third night, I was down in the hold, you know, bunks about that far apart all the way up, and I was wanting a cigarette, but you couldn't smoke down there. I had to go up and go down into the latrine. So I was just thinking about that when the -- a ship -- it was an aircraft carrier -- rammed in the side of us. And it hit us on the right side in Number 1-- I've got some pictures and stuff Johnny got for me off the internet. It was a French carrier named *Bearn*. And later in the *Static Line* magazine I get from the Airborne, this guy had a letter in there and I read it and he was on that ship. I wrote to him and I contacted about seven different people that way. And anyhow, it hit us and it was just -- I knew it wasn't a torpedo, but it was just a big crunching sound and then the lights went out and then they came back on. There wasn't but just a few lights so you could see around in the night to get around. And I could hear these guys in the other -- Number 1 hold, screaming up there for a little bit. They didn't last long. You could hear the water rush in and it was a rough sea and when the ship -- the front end would go up, the water would rush out and was taking them out too. And

when it'd go down, they'd rush back in. Well, they was all paratroopers on that ship. It was -- I got the name of it here somewhere. There wasn't a bit of panic in that hold. Everybody got up and put their lifejackets on and there wasn't any water in there and we didn't know what was going on. But an officer came down and told us to stay put right then. See, we was below the water and the next deck up was above it. But that Number 1 hold was flooded completely and we lost a hundred and seven of those paratroopers.

We lost four Navy guys that was on deck up there, on the -- I guess on lookout or something. They was on a gun up there too. The troop transports -- they have a gun or two on them. But one of them was killed on the deck up there. He was still on; the other three was lost overboard. But the convoy went on and left us, us and the carrier. Of course, the carrier wasn't damaged much; it was just in the bow, where it hit us. And they went on to Germany -- England, or wherever they was going to land -- at Le Havre, France, I guess.

But -- now where was it? Oh yeah, they moved us out from down there then. We had to leave all of our equipment down there. They was afraid that bulkhead would give way and it would flood us. If it had flooded this next hold, I guess the ship would have gone down, but it missed us about eight feet in front of us. That's about how close I came that time to being in the wrong place. But I was in the right place, I guess. They went on. They left two destroyer escorts with us to protect us. The rest of the forty ships went on, so they said we was going to the Azore Islands because that was the closest land and we couldn't go but five knots an hour. But the aircraft carrier and us and the two destroyer escorts, we made it to the Azores to Ponta Delgada or something that belonged to Portugal, and they was a neutral country. So we was in distress, so we could go in -- went in the harbor, but the two destroyer escorts couldn't go in. We went in and stayed there just about a week. And those people on the island, some of them would row out there in a rowboat and row in the ship in that big hole and hand up oranges to us and sell us oranges. *(Laughs)*

While we was there, they let half of the -- after four or five days, they let half of them go ashore and the other half was going the next day. Of course, that was me. But by the next day, this big English transport -- I mean, ship -- one of the class -- I don't remember the name of it. I used to have all the ships that I rode on -- which was eight or ten of them -- I had the names in a little log book that went in your parachute. But I lost it somewhere. So I have trouble remembering the ships. But then -- where was I.....

David Elmore: Where did that ship.....

Harold Johnston: Oh, yeah.....

David Elmore:take you from the Azores?

Harold Johnston: Hmm?

David Elmore: Where did that ship take you from the Azores?

0:49:08.0 He finally joins Company D of the 502nd of the 101st in Germany and sees Hitler's home in the Alps

Harold Johnston: Oh, it was coming from Australia and it had civilians, you know, up higher up. It was a big ocean liner. We got on it and it took us to Liverpool, England. That's where they was going. We got off there and got on a train and rode all night across England. I mean, we were on there all night; it wasn't moving all the time. We went to Southampton and got off and got on a boat that was going to Le Havre, France. I guess that's where we was supposed to have gone to start with. But we started over and something was wrong with the engine. They come back and put us on another ship and we went over and made it. *(Laughs)* We went over there and got off and got on a train. These forty and eight cars, you know. The one I got had been strafed down the top and it was leaking and it rained. We was on it about two days and nights. It took us up into Belgium. I can't remember the name of it -- anyhow, we went to Belgium to the replacement center. It had been a girls' college, where we stayed. The Germans had been in there, when they had it. And there was bunks in there, filled with old straw-covered -- I mean ticks. Tick-covered straw.

So they assigned out to different units from there. And I went to Company D of the 502nd of the 101st. And at that time, they was in southern Germany, so we got on the -- on the trucks and went to southern Germany. The war was still going on, but you know, the Germans had about had it then, after the Battle of the Bulge, you know. It wasn't successful for them. But I joined the 502nd of the 101st in the Alsace in southern Germany. And we went on from there. We went -- was going towards Australia -- I mean, Austria. *(Laughs)* And we saw some action going that way.

Once when we went down a road. You know, we was on trucks then. We came up on a -- where our fighter planes had caught troops retreating. These was horse-drawn anti-aircraft guns, and they had shot it all up and there was dead horses laying all around and two or three dead German soldiers. We went on up through, advancing through there, just -- didn't jump or anything. And never did jump after I joined them; there wasn't any reason to. They was using us on the line. So I didn't make any combat jumps; mine was all in the States.

We went up through there to southern Germany and **Wortock (53:38)**. We had set up roadblocks and taken prisoners once in a while and then we got to where we was taking a bunch of prisoners. And later in the war, they got to where they'd come in, maybe a whole outfit. You couldn't -- but we went to -- along at the end of the war, we was almost to Berchtesgaden and we wound up there at the 101st. The 506th regiment was the first ones in and the 502nd, we went in right after them.

That was where Hitler had his mansion up on top of this mountain. It was just about like Pinnacle Mountain at Little Rock. It had a - you couldn't drive to the top because it was too steep. You could drive about halfway and it had a tunnel to go into the center of it. It said they did that with slave labor, you know. And it had an elevator that'd go up to the top and you had a big house built on top of the mountain. It was about three stories

down under the mountain and one up above. But they had some horses there that belonged to the SS troops and a lot of the -- two or three German Generals of Hitler's had a lot of their loot there, and some of it was still on railroad cars, but I didn't get in on any of that. But they got a bunch of that stuff. Some of the 101st got some good souvenirs. I got some pistols and rifles and a helmet. I got a sword there and -- let's see. Well, anyhow, while we was there, we heard that the -- Hitler had committed suicide, you know. So we didn't know until the next day that the war was ended, but then this other general that took over -- he decided it was over, because they was beat. So the war ended and we was there. So we started then.....

0:57:01.8 The war ends in Europe

David Elmore: Did you celebrate any? When it ended?

Harold Johnston: Well, there wasn't any celebrating to do, but we was glad it was over. We were sure glad then. But I could -- later, I could see on the news reel thing -- people in the States -- all these soldiers and sailors; they was all celebrating. And they was celebrating over there, too, but I didn't celebrate. I was glad it was over.

But we was there, we was staying in a hotel there too. It was two story and German soldiers had been living there before too. They had bunks in there. But shortly after that, being the V-E Day in Europe, well, they started letting out the older troops. You know, that had a lot of points? They started that point system and I added mine up. I had a hundred and twelve and it took seventy-six to get out. But you got a point for each month in service and another point for each month overseas, so I had nearly three years overseas. But I had a hundred and twelve points, so they notified all of us to turn in our stuff, you know, extra stuff. But that suited me fine, so I was -- and they offered me a promotion to stay because they was losing some of the older men, the sergeants and all. I told them no, I was going. So they sent us back to Nancy, France, to wait to come back to the States for discharge. And see, that was in May, wasn't it? When the V-E Day?

David Elmore: I think something like.....

Harold Johnston: Yeah.

David Elmore: Yeah, I believe so.

Harold Johnston: We went back to Nancy and stayed there, waiting on ships, but they was sending -- using the ships to send in troops from Europe to the Pacific, so there wasn't any ships for us. So we was just there, doing occupation duty, I guess. Supposed to, but we was just loafing and running around and whatever you could do.

I was still single at the time, so. We was there until V-J Day. When we heard that, there was some celebrating went on then. But after V-J Day, it wasn't about a week till we got us a ship to come back to the States and we came back. Then I met Garner there. He was a high point man (*laughs*) and I found him; the one I'd been separated from the

whole -- but he'd been to the 17th Airborne and he jumped across the Rhine late there. But I'd been delayed with that ship being hit and all that, so I missed all of the jumping and all. Now, Nancy, France, that was close to the Riviera, you know. You could see women there with not much on, you know. Some of them had on bathing suits you could see through. *(Laughter)*

David Elmore: Did you liberate any of the contents of any bottles while you were there?

Harold Johnston: Any what?

David Elmore: Any of the contents of the bottles while you were there?

Harold Johnston: Oh, yeah. They had -- they had some -- what was it they had? Oh, that hotel we was staying in in Berchtesgaden, the man and the woman that owned it, they still lived there, you know. We'd go out everyday and -- with shorts on and do exercises. Of course, with the Airborne, you had to run all the time and do pushups and all that. But we came in one day and we saw them, the man and the woman, come from upstairs, coming down with a basket. It had a bunch of potatoes and groceries and stuff in it. Well, they knew they'd had it upstairs, so they got to looking around and one guy was looking out his window and he saw the guys over in the next window. They was looking out and they saw a window in between, so they knew they was supposed to be in the next room, so they went out and they had a large thing over that door -- large lockers, and they pulled them back and there was a door that went inside the room. They went in there and they got a bunch of liquor out of there. They just took it and I guess they left the potatoes. But they had this stuff with straw around it and you know, some of it was Italian and -- but the Germans had sacked all those countries.

I'd been in one barn that had all kind of bracelet things just stacked on shelves in there, I mean, in cartons of it. There wasn't any watches, but there was metal bands. And they had all kind of stuff like that, but they didn't have much to eat.

And the people would ride bicycles, too. We'd see older people -- it was unusual to me -- riding a bicycle. We got on a ship, one of the big Castle Line, too. We came back and we went to Boston Harbor, where we went this time. We got off at Myles -- Myles Standish was the name of the -- Red Cross met us with a carton of milk, or bottle of milk. And they had POW's, prisoners of war, working the mess halls, where we ate good there for a day or two. *(Laughs)* They sent us to the ones where I was getting discharged. I guess they'd send you to the closest to home -- they was sending me to Saint Louis to Jefferson Barracks. That's where I was discharged. They discharged me and I got five or six hundred dollars or something, whatever I had coming, and unused leave and all that, my salary. And I caught a train and came home. I was glad to get out of there.

1:06:21.1 Returning home

David Elmore: What was the homecoming like?

Harold Johnston: Well, I went to Little Rock to my sister's and there was two of them still living there. One of them, her husband got out of the service and she wasn't there and they drove to Dardanelle and we had a -- glad to be home. I drew, I don't know, five or six weeks of unemployment, I think. You know, whatever they was paying you while you was looking for work. I wasn't looking at first. *(Laughs)* I wasn't wanting to work.

David Elmore: What was one of the first things you wanted to do when you got back?

Harold Johnston: Oh, I just wanted to go home, I guess. I ended up just running around.

David Elmore: Well, after that, in the days and weeks after you got home, and you said you were looking for work after a little while. What -- did you ever take advantage of the GI Bill?

1:07:42.0 Getting back to work at home

Harold Johnston: Yeah. I guess I took advantage. But I wasn't -- at first; I went to work for Harvard Company, rebuilding generators for automobiles and rebuilding generators and starters. They had us on -- I was getting a little salary and I was getting money from the VA for -- what'd you call that?

Johnny Johnston: On the job training?

Harold Johnston: Yeah. On the job training. But I worked at that, I guess, four or five months and I saw what my supervisor was making and he wasn't making a whole lot, *(laughs)* so I was looking around and my brother-in-law, my older sister's husband, was on the fire department for -- the U.S. Army had an airfield there at Little Rock. He was on the fire department there. He was the assistant chief. So I got on there and quit that other job. I worked there a year. And the Army -- Air Force, which was what I was in; it wasn't separate. You know, later it was it's own -- but I worked there a year and so the Army pulled out of it and turned it back over to the city and the city fire department took over the crash crew and so I -- they was hiring all of us that was available and eligible. And I was -- you know, a good prospect, I guess. But they -- some of them were too old and some wasn't physically able and all that. But they hired about seven or eight of us and we took the exam later. So I just went to work for the city, you know, on the crash crew, and worked there five years. Then I transferred out to Pulaski Heights on a pumper company out there, where I worked the rest of the time.

David Elmore: How long was that again? How long did you stay in the fire department there?

Harold Johnston: From -- from 1946 to '76. It was thirty years -- thirty-one, I think -- thirty-one actually. I retired on my son's birthday, the 26th of June, 1976, wasn't it?

Johnny Johnston: I don't know.

Harold Johnston: *(Laughs)* My son's the real hero. He was in Vietnam. He really caught it.

David Elmore: Did you stay in contact with some of your buddies during the war? Over the years?

1:11:29.3 Reunions with friends over the years

Harold Johnston: Oh, yeah. Yeah, there was so many us that was from Dardanelle to start with. A few years after we retired, we had a reunion up there from Company F and so there was a bunch showed up. We had it up at the old armory and so after that, we had it every year for several years, until last year, we had our last one. There wasn't about eight or nine of us left, I guess. So they decided to not have it anymore. And they took the money we'd put in, you know, to buy flowers and all that -- about nine hundred dollars -- they took it and donated it to the.....

Johnny Johnston: DAV.

Harold Johnston:outfit that hauls veterans to the hospital. You know, these vans.....

David Elmore: Yeah. The distinguished veterans?

Johnny Johnston: Disabled veterans.

David Elmore: The disabled veterans?

Harold Johnston: Yeah. Yeah, that's what we voted to do with the money.

David Elmore: That's wonderful.

Harold Johnston: It wasn't a whole lot, but it helped, I guess.

David Elmore: Every little bit helps, that's right.

Harold Johnston: Yeah.

Johnny Johnston: They got to where it was just too much.....

Harold Johnston: But I went to.....

Johnny Johnston:strain on them to try to make it. They all got too old.

Harold Johnston: I been to some Airborne too -- reunions. I wouldn't know anyone hardly, but that there, I'd know a bunch of them. And they were still my friends. I'd see them every once in a while. There's three of them that lived in Little Rock and all.

1:13:30.2 Questions on his thoughts about our country, democracy, liberty, and citizenship responsibilities

David Elmore: We're getting here to the last segment of our interview here, so there's a series of questions -- you probably saw it on the question sheet that I sent you. These are more or less opinion questions. And like your interview, it's your story and there's no wrong way to say it, and so these are your opinions. They're not right or wrong; it's just what you think about things.

Harold Johnston: Um-hmm.

David Elmore: And the first question that we almost ask -- we ask almost every veteran that we ask, is why do you think it would be important -- or it is important for students to study history?

Harold Johnston: To study history?

David Elmore: Yes sir.

Harold Johnston: Well, they need to know what went on. I mean, to know -- they need to know what we went through, you know, in the Depression and all that. And the war and all that. And they need to know about the school situation, the way it was, too, because you know, we had a black school up at Dardanelle and they didn't have anything hardly. They used old football things from the white school. Which... that wasn't right. They didn't -- some of them wouldn't even have helmets. They called them the black wolves (*laughs*) and the Dardanelle sand lizards, you know. But that wasn't right. But the school didn't last all that much longer. They started hauling them to Morrilton. I mean from Yell County to Morrilton, now, for a few years before they ever integrated. And that wasn't right, either.

But I was at my dad's one night and I saw a school bus go by after dark, you know. It was the winter time. I said, "Are they having a ball game?" And he said, "No." I said, "That's a school bus that went by," and he said, "Oh, they are taking those black kids home." They was hauling from over at Ola and Plainview to Morrilton to school. There wasn't all that many, but there was quite a few in Dardanelle until they left and went to Chicago and Denver and places to get a decent job, I guess. As long as there was cotton and all, they could make it there.

David Elmore: In the last sixty years, there have been a lot of changes in our world and our society and our country. And a lot of them have to do with science and

medicine and so forth, but there have also been a lot of changes in our communities and the way we react and interact with each other. And you brought up a subject right there about the way life was back then. But tell us, in our sense of community in these past sixty years, what it is that you think has been that changed? And I guess, really, what I'm driving at here is do you think we are and/or should be our brother's keeper?

Harold Johnston: Well, I guess we should be. You mean, overseas and all?

David Elmore: Anywhere, yes sir.

Harold Johnston: We always have been. We bailed France out and all these other countries and we ought to try to control this atomic and all that stuff. But I don't know how it's going to end. I don't know who called me on the telephone and set this up, but I couldn't understand a word you said -- or whoever it was.

David Elmore: Was it a girl? Probably was.

Harold Johnston: No, it was a man.

David Elmore: Oh.

Harold Johnston: I had to get my wife to talk to him (*laughter*) and she'd relay it. I couldn't -- I mean, his -- I can understand some men and some I can't.

David Elmore: Oh. Well, I'm sorry. If that was me, I apologize. I hope it wasn't (*laughs*).

Harold Johnston: I mean, I couldn't. That's the way my hearing aids are.

David Elmore: Uh.....

Harold Johnston: If it's the noise -- of course, when it's quiet, I can understand every word you say. But I've got some powerful hearing aids because I can't hear anything without it. I can barely hear my wife and I wear them sixteen hours a day.

David Elmore: Yes sir.

Harold Johnston: But -- yeah, go on with your questions.

1:18:45.0 His thoughts about war resolving conflicts between countries

David Elmore: Oh. Well, the next question I was going to ask in -- and that is, do you think war is a good means to resolve conflicts between countries?

Harold Johnston: Well, I don't know about the recent wars. I don't think they was. I didn't like Vietnam. Of course, they got my son; he volunteered, but I guess he would have been drafted anyway. But he volunteered and went over there and put in his year. He's got some medals and really caught it over there, too.

David Elmore: What.....

Harold Johnston: But this.....

David Elmore: Oh.

Harold Johnston:one of George W's war, I don't think we should have been there. That's my opinion. And I guess it's a lot of other people's opinion now.

David Elmore: Well, and you and all of these great men and women that have been our champions overseas and here fought for the right for that opinion. And I want to thank you for it.

Harold Johnston: With what?

David Elmore: I want to thank you for doing that, doing your part.....

Harold Johnston: Oh, yeah.

David Elmore:and your son, for doing his part, because you all fought for the right for us to talk like this and have these opinions and that's a wonderful thing to do. The next question actually touches on that subject, and that is what do you -- what is democracy to you?

1:20:36.2 His definition of democracy

Harold Johnston: Democracy? That's just the way we was supposed to be, I guess. I mean, we're supposed to rule ourselves with our representatives and all that, but it doesn't always happen. I'm not sure what you're -- we had some black troops in World War II, too, but they were mostly in supply and driving trucks. They've hauled us places too, in Germany and all over. They was doing their job, what they was assigned, but they wasn't done right there either. And they came home and weren't treated right. But that was me too -- I mean I never was prejudiced towards black kids in Dardanelle either.

David Elmore: You know, we have actually interviewed a gentleman who was a black man and in the Army, who was from Dardanelle, and he has actually said a very similar thing about how Dardanelle was a very open place towards black and white relations.....

Harold Johnston: Um-hmm. Yeah.

David Elmore:and so forth. And he said that same thing.

Harold Johnston: Yeah.

David Elmore: And that's -- that's -- I'm actually glad that you mentioned that, because it reminded me about that.

Harold Johnston: Yeah, I've got friends up there; they're all dead now, but -- I guess. But some young people, too. We had good neighbors.

David Elmore: Well, this next question is slightly related to that last one about democracy and that is -- what are the responsibilities of a citizen in this country? What are we supposed to do as a citizen?

1:23:05.8 Responsibilities of citizens of this country in his opinion and what liberty means to him

Harold Johnston: Well, I don't know. Just when they have an election, vote your -- whatever you think. I voted for some Republicans, but I've never voted to send one to Washington yet. Between us, I voted for every one that ever ran against Orval Faubus. I wasn't a Faubus person. My dad was, to start with (*laughter*). But I think he wound up voting for Rockefeller at the last. He lived to be ninety-five and he's been dead several years.

David Elmore: This next question is also similar, but not quite the same, and the men and women that have bore arms for this country, who fought for this country, probably feel this particular word more keenly than a lot of the other people in this country who haven't served. And that is, what is liberty? To you?

Harold Johnston: Well, liberty. I guess I've got about as much as I ever had. I can go where I want to and do what I want to and -- I don't have much money. Don't have to have money, I guess. (*Laughs*) I worked thirty-something years on the fire department. The retirement wasn't very much. After that, I didn't do anything for four years but help build a house, and my wife was still working. But she quit work and keeping kids and I started mowing yards for people. But my pension's a little better now. I go to the VA now. I didn't for years. I think they do a good job taking care of veterans now. They didn't -- I didn't think they did at the end of the war. Maybe they did. I'm having to pay a co-pay now; I got a little raise on my pension and it put me up over the..... (*laughs*)

David Elmore: Well, this next question I'm going to ask is a two part question. And the first -- I'm going to start with this first part here, is -- what do you think the biggest problem facing our country today is?

Harold Johnston: The biggest problem for me is the price of gasoline, for one thing. And the price of everything else because of that. And I don't know why something isn't

done about it or why it wasn't done earlier or something. I'm sure George Bush is not going to do anything about it, but we got people in Washington, too, but I don't guess they are doing anything about it or whether they can or not. They claim they can't, but I don't know how the country -- nation's going to wind up, but we may go bankrupt like in '29 or whatever it -- they bailed out this housing thing. That's a lot of money they're taking on.

David Elmore: Now let me flip that question around ask -- this is the second part of it, and that is -- what do you think the biggest hope for our country is today?

Harold Johnston: I don't know what the biggest hope is. I'd like to see the Democrats get a little chance again. I thought Clinton did a good job when he was in there. I mean, as far as a president. That other stuff wasn't so good (*laughter*). I was for his wife. I told a friend of hers -- well, he was based in Clinton up there too, you know. What was his name? Lived down from us there?

Johnny Johnston: Baker?

Harold Johnston: Huh?

Johnny Johnston: Dr. Baker?

Harold Johnston: No, it wasn't bought from him. The next one.

Johnny Johnston: I don't remember.

Harold Johnston: His wife -- anyhow, I told him -- I said if Clinton does all right, his wife would be the next president, but he messed up with women and all. But that was mostly what his trouble was.

1:28:58.5 Words of wisdom for future generations

David Elmore: Now we're up to what I call the whopper question. So I don't mean to skew your answer by saying that to you, but our question here is -- you've been through a lot of things in your life during that war and since then as fire chief and fireman for Little Rock. And having lived a long life and experienced a lot of things, seen a lot of things, been a lot of places.....

Harold Johnston: Um-hmm.

David Elmore:so you've probably lived your life by some kind of piece of wisdom that you might like to pass on to the future generations. What would that wisdom be?

Harold Johnston: I never have thought about it. I didn't see that in the (*laughter*) what you was going to ask either. But I don't remember -- or I don't know what I could say. Well, just try to figure out what you think would be the best and vote for the ones that you want to. I see where the representative from Alaska now is in a problem. Lot of

them got problems. They are all just greedy for themselves. We've got them here. I never did that. My son was on the fire department too. He's retired, but he's -- I didn't get him on, he got on himself. I didn't want him on. *(Laughs)*

David Elmore: Wonderful. Well, is there anything that you would like to add that I haven't covered or we haven't covered here that you'd just like to get on the record that I just haven't covered?

Harold Johnston: I don't know. Just love your brother, I guess, or something. I don't.....

David Elmore: Wonderful.

Harold Johnston: I hope that it turns out.

David Elmore: Is there anything that you had, Coach? Do you have any question you think he ought to tell us?

Johnny Johnston: Oh, he's given me the best raising I could have, you know. He taught me right from wrong and wanted me to do right. And I've tried. I fall short a lot. I'm a decent person because of him and my mama. You know, and my grandparents and aunts and uncles. I couldn't have had a better raising.

David Elmore: That's wonderful. Well, thank you, sir. That was actually a very wonderful interview. I want to thank you.....

Harold Johnston: Okay.

David Elmore:for doing that.

Harold Johnston: Okay.

David Elmore: You did a great job. But one -- we got one more thing here. If you would, sir, could you stand behind your father? We're going to do a little bit of a kind of video portrait here of you all. And what we'll do is if you all will look into the lens of the camera here and count to thirty in your head. *(Pause)* Are you there yet? *(Laughs)*

Johnny Johnston: Twenty.

David Elmore: Okay *(Laughs)*

End of interview at 1:33:01.4