

Interviewee: Carl Johnson

Interviewer: Thomas Saylor

Date of interview: 10 August 2002

Location: Mr. Johnson's room in an Esko, MN, nursing home

Transcribed by: Linda Gerber, September 2002

Edited by: Thomas Saylor, December 2002

Carl Johnson was born 9 September 1915 on a farm in Spalding Township, Aitkin County, Minnesota. The son of Swedish immigrant parents, Carl attended school through the eighth grade; during the Depression years, he worked as a mechanic in the towns of Aitkin and McGregor, Minnesota. Carl was working at an auto dealership in McGregor, aged twenty-six, when he was drafted into the US Army in May 1942.

In the service, Carl was stationed from mid-1942 to mid-1944 in England, at the 8th Air Force Replacement Center near the town of Stafford. Given his prewar skilled trade, he was kept out of a direct combat role.

Carl worked in the Army as a mechanic, repairing a wide range of vehicles, then as a motor sergeant, responsible for identifying problems and organizing repairs. In mid-1944 Carl was returned to the US and scheduled for assignment to the Pacific, but several health problems landed him in hospital at Lowry Field, Colorado. Once out of the hospital Carl remained at Lowry until his discharge in October 1945.

Again a civilian, Carl married Edna Bartells (1946), and after several years in the Denver area the couple returned to McGregor. Carl later worked for Diamond Match Company in Cloquet, retiring in 1977.

Carl and Edna raised four children; at the time of this interview (August 2002) they lived in Esko, Minnesota.

Interview key:

T = Thomas Saylor

C = Carl Johnson

[text] = words added by editor, either for clarification or explanation

(*) = words or phrase unclear**

NOTE: interview has been edited for clarity

Tape 1, Side A. Counter begins at 000.

T: Today is the 10th of August 2002 and this is the interview with Mr. Carl Johnson. First Mr. Johnson, on the record, thanks very much for talking with us today.

C: You're more than welcome.

T: The first thing we talked a bit about when you grew up and what you did as a young man. Let me ask about the 7th of December 1941. That's the day the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. What were you doing when you first heard that news?

C: I thought that I'd be going to war. I'd have to go because I was a single person and I did have a trade.

T: As it turns out you were drafted not that long thereafter. About the Pearl Harbor news—would you say you were worried or angry or nervous? How would you describe yourself?

C: I don't really know. It's been so long ago that... I probably was a little angry.

T: Did you consider going to enlist?

C: Not really. I felt if they wanted me they'd come and get me.

T: And they did before too long.

C: Yes, that's right.

T: Do you remember getting the letter saying that you'd been drafted?

C: No, I don't.

T: Were you still living with your folks at that time or not?

C: No, I was working out. I was a mechanic.

T: And you were living on your own?

C: I boarded at a place.

T: But not with your folks anymore?

C: I'd go there on weekends. They were only five miles away from where I worked.

T: How did your folks react when you told them you'd been drafted?

C: I don't really know. I think they expected it. Having five boys in the family some of us would have to go.

T: Of those five boys how many did you say were drafted into the service?

C: Five. And all five of us were overseas.

T: All five of you went overseas. How many went to Europe like you?

C: We all did.

T: All of you went to Europe?

C: Well, I'll take that back. My third brother wound up in the hospital and he got a medical discharge so he didn't go.

T: But nobody went to the Pacific?

C: Nobody went to the Pacific.

T: Very quickly, without basic training you said, were sent over to England. What unit did you serve with over in England?

C: 8th Air Force Replacement Center.

T: You told me that was in Stone, which is north of Stafford in England.

C: Right.

T: Was that a large facility?

C: I'd say it was quite large. What our duties were to receive complete units from the States, and from there they went to different areas.

T: So an awful lot of guys must have gone through your place.

C: Right.

(1, A, 068)

T: And they didn't stay very long, I take it?

C: Probably two weeks. Then some of them would stay maybe two months.

T: So it differed depending on when and where they were needed?

C: Right. Some were replacements and they stayed there and those that were mechanically inclined we had them in the shop doing different things.

T: What exactly were your duties at this base?

C: I was a mechanic, to begin with. After I'd been there a while they sent me out to inspect the equipment that had to be repaired to know what to do and what not.

T: So equipment came in this facility to be repaired and then sent back?

C: The equipment that we had was used. We used an awful lot of trucks.

T: So there were trucks constantly in need of repair.

C: Right. And service.

T: Regular service. Like maintenance. In England there, you were part of the war against Germany. How did you yourself perceive the enemy? The Germans?

C: I figured the guys that were flying those planes were doing the same thing as we were. They were drafted to do that. It's the upper echelons that tell you what to do and what not to do.

T: So you wouldn't say you had any animosity against the Germans themselves?

C: No. They were there for purposes like we were.

T: Did that attitude that you had, did that change at all during the time you were in the service?

C: Not really. Not really.

T: How about the guys around you? Did you notice any different attitudes from different people?

C: I couldn't say that I could see it.

T: At your base there, was that at a base that combat aircraft flew from?

C: No.

T: In a sense you were once step removed from actual combat situations.

C: That's right.

T: Did you still feel yourself to be part of the larger war effort?

C: Yes. We had a duty to do and we did it.

T: Did you feel resentful yourself that you weren't closer to the action or were you happy to be where you were?

C: I was happy where I was. I was twenty-seven years old, well I was twenty-eight, I guess, when I came back to the States again.

T: Were you a bit older than the other fellas that you were working with?

C: No. We had one guy from Pittsburgh that was forty-two years old.

T: He was doing the same thing you were?

C: Doing the same thing that we were.

T: Looking around yourself you didn't see eighteen, nineteen, twenty year old recruits necessarily?

C: No. They were a little older. In the mid-twenties.

T: Were most of these guys skilled already? As mechanics?

C: They had gone to mechanic schools in the service, some of them. Some of them had done some mechanical work.

T: So you were working with a number of skilled men on the job then?

C: I'd say they all had to be skilled. Because we didn't only have American equipment, we had some British equipment too. We had to use a lot of judgment.

T: Did you have British or troops of other nations working with you in your unit?

C: No. Just Americans with the equipment.

T: You mentioned the Germans a moment ago. Did you ever see the Germans?

C: No.

T: In airplanes or POWs?

C: No, not really. We heard them.

T: What do you mean you heard them?

C: Nine o'clock every night they paid us a visit. They were flying over. We could tell them from our planes, because their engines in their aircraft weren't synchronized. Woo-wo-woo-wo. There was no synchronization in the engines. At nine o'clock every night they'd go over. They followed the Trent River, and that Trent River area was always a fog. They followed that river and they'd see the fog. They went as far as London. The closest we were to bombing was fifteen miles.

T: So your unit really was almost protected from a lot of the actual war itself.

C: Right.

T: Did the experience of being part of the war, how did it differ from what you imagined it might be like before you went over there?

C: I really don't know. I felt that when we went over there we had a duty to do and we did it.

T: So you really didn't have any preconceived ideas of what it was going to be like when you got there?

C: No.

T: Just kind of wait to see what comes?

C: Well, I knew that I would be in the mechanical field.

T: You didn't know where though.

C: Didn't know where.

T: Did you have a regular duty schedule, like shift work, or was it as needed?

C: It was every day, seven days a week.

T: What kind of hours did you work?

C: I suppose it depended on what the breakdowns were.

T: So you might work certain hours one day and other hours the next?

C: Right. But usually the rest of them would get off at five, six o'clock and go to town.

T: Yourself included?

C: Not really. No.

T: The closest town was Stafford?

C: Stone.

T: Did you go to town much yourself?

C: Not that much.

T: What did fellas go to town for?

C: They had a beer. That's the only thing we could get. It was limited. They would open maybe at seven o'clock in the evening and then by nine o'clock, "All your glasses please."

T: You remember that much. How was the beer over there?

C: I didn't like it. I'm not a beer drinker.

T: If you go into town it means you probably saw or interacted with the local population?

C: Oh, yes.

T: How would you describe the people you interacted with?

C: They were real nice to us. They were glad that we were there. They'd do things for us, like this one family. He had been in World War I. They had one daughter. We would go to shows. I didn't drink. She became my sister's pen pal. I don't know, the last time I talked to my sister she hadn't got a letter from her. They corresponded regularly.

T: Forty some years it sounds like.

C: Never saw each other.

T: Just wrote letters. How about yourself? Did you visit with this family or other locals somewhat regularly?

C: Yes. I guess I'd say that. Another family that I met had a daughter about the same age. She had a Canadian pilot boyfriend so there was nothing between us. They'd invite me over for meals and stuff. Really nice!

We met these four girls walking down the road and we had gotten a Sunday off. The captain told us to pack up and take off. So we got to walking with these four girls, conversing. She says, "Are your dogs getting tired?" And I said, "No. That is not an English expression." She had been in New York. Her father worked for a salt company, and of course when the war broke out he had to go back to England. They were real nice people. I enjoyed visiting with them a lot.

(1, A, 230)

T: Did you observe any problems between the local population and any American service personnel?

C: They didn't like smart alecks.

T: Did we have some of those in uniform?

C: Yes, we did. Yes, we did. And they belittled the natives. The English people.

T: What do you mean?

C: I don't know. Snobby.

T: Talking about their accents? The British accents?

C: In some of their lifestyle which was a lot different than we had.

T: For example.

C: I can't really say. I don't really remember.

T: There was occasional friction between the local population and some American service personnel.

C: Yes. I probably shouldn't say this...

T: Go ahead.

C: I found that the southern boys were more snobbish toward the English people.

T: Rude?

C: Rude. Belittled them.

T: Did you have a chance to travel for a day or longer outside your base or the town of Stone?

C: No, not really. Not really.

T: Were you in London at all?

C: I don't recall if I was or not. If it was it was... I cannot remember.

T: Was alcohol consumption or drinking a problem?

C: Some did. Somebody'd get more than they could handle. Let's face it—alcohol and beer weren't that plentiful in England. It was more or less rationed.

T: So it was hard to get?

C: Hard to get. You couldn't go in and buy a bottle that I could recall.

T: Was there drinking on base where you were?

C: No. Not that I ever can recall.

T: On your base were there minorities? Were there blacks on the base?

C: Very few. I think we had two.

T: What did they do?

C: They worked just like we did.

T: As mechanics?

C: One of them did some mechanical work. The other guy cleaned up the trucks. I myself never had any gripes but we had some southern boys. I know the one was from Oklahoma. He and I were walking down the sidewalk one day, off base. We were both staff sergeants. We were talking and he looked up and here was a black master sergeant.

T: This means at least one rank above you.

C: Right. And he looked up and he says, "Get off the sidewalk you black son of a b." And I felt so bad. He [the black sergeant] probably thought the same thing about me as he did [this other fellow]. He couldn't stand to meet him on the sidewalk.

T: How did the black guy react when that happened?

C: He just politely stepped to the side, and when we got by he stepped back on the sidewalk.

T: He didn't challenge him or...

C: No. No.

T: That made you feel what? Embarrassed or ashamed or...?

C: I felt ashamed because they were there for the same purpose as we were. But there was a problem.

T: How were the relations between white guys from the north and white guys from the south?

C: I didn't see that too much.

T: You mean you didn't see difficulty?

C: No. Not that I could see anyway. I was from about as far north as you could get (*laughs*).

T: And you got along with people okay.

C: We had several people from Texas, Oklahoma. I was more or less kind of a boss.

T: You were a staff sergeant pretty quickly.

(1, A, 298)

C: Right. Just bang, bang, bang and I was...

T: You mentioned there were only a few blacks on your base then.

C: I don't recall if there was more than two or three and one of them claimed that he wasn't colored, he wasn't a Negro. They said that he was from white parents. We never bothered anything.

T: How about others, Hispanics, Mexicans, American Indians... Any of these people in your unit?

C: I don't recall. If there was, we never had any problems.

T: How did you stay in touch with family and loved ones back home?

C: Write letters back and forth.

T: Were you a regular letter writer?

C: I probably didn't write as much as I should have. But we would correspond.

T: When you wrote back home what kind of things did you tell the folks? Did you write to your folks?

C: To my folks. To my sisters. Just told them... we couldn't give away any military information. Where we were going to be or what we were going to do or anything like that.

T: Did they know where you were in England?

C: Yes.

T: But they didn't necessarily know where exactly or what you were doing.

C: What I was doing.

T: How often did you get mail from home?

C: I don't remember. There were friends, too, that wrote to me.

T: How important was mail to a soldier away from home?

C: We looked for it every day.

T: Did you?

C: Always looked for letters from home.

T: Was there a time that you got a letter than was especially meaningful to you?

C: No, not really. There were no deaths in the family while I was overseas.

T: Your brothers all made it back okay?

C: All my brothers came back.

T: Did you get mail pretty regularly from home?

C: I don't really remember how often I'd get letters.

T: You got some mail.

C: I got some mail. I got a news clipping or newspaper from home.

T: Speaking of news, was there news available to you on the base to keep up with things, with events of the war?

C: Oh, yes. We had radios and stuff.

T: Were there newspapers too?

C: Yes.

T: *Stars and Stripes*?

C: Yes.

T: Were you one who followed the news and kept up with what was going on?

C: More or less. Yes. Let's face it, I was twenty-nine, almost thirty years old when I came back.

T: That's what you were. You were born in 1915. Did you make any contacts, people that you met in the service that you stayed in contact with after you were out?

C: I did for a while. This one friend of mine from Detroit, Michigan. We'd write back and forth and he even came up to see me, the wife and I. All the way to Minnesota and it so happened that we had gone to Canada.

(1, A, 343)

T: When he came to see you?

C: When he came to see us and we never heard from him or saw him after that. I don't recall but I'm sure that I wrote him a letter. I guess he just gave up on us.

T: That's too bad.

C: Yes.

T: Are there reunions of your unit or of your...

C: Not that I know of.

T: Is that something that you would be interested in or not really?

C: We weren't that close. There was just a handful of us back in the motorpool and they were from all over the United States. We were just a small group.

T: How many of you were working together there?

C: I'd say it wasn't over twenty, twenty-five.

T: So a small unit. You were back in the States when President Roosevelt died in April of 1945. Do you remember hearing that news?

C: Yes, I guess I did.

T: How did you and those around you react to that news?

C: I don't really recall. It was a shock. Like it was in the service. There is always somebody to take your place. Even if you're the president.

T: Back up just a second. You left England in 1944. You were there for almost two years, right?

C: Yes.

T: How did it feel to be leaving and coming back stateside?

C: We knew that we weren't going to stay stateside. That we would be shipped to another area.

T: So you figured going back to the States was just a temporary thing?

C: Right.

T: Did you expect that you might be headed to the Pacific?

C: Yes.

(1, A, 366)

C: I don't recall what our unit was that we were supposed to go. But I wound up in a hospital.

T: So you were designated for reassignment to the Pacific.

C: Right.

T: What happened to put you in the hospital?

C: Age was against me too.

T: You had your appendix out, did you mention?

C: Yes. I had my tonsils removed and I had my appendix and I don't know what else.

T: So you were in the hospital for a while or in and out a few times?

C: I was in and out.

T: So you ended up in Denver at Lowry Field.

C: Yes.

T: Longer than you really expected to be there?

C: Right. I was expecting to be shipped out. I had my tonsils taken out four days before Christmas.

T: 1944.

C: This was in Denver at Lowry Field?

End of Side A. Side B begins at counter 380.

T: So while you were in the hospital that time or numerous times, were you thinking about being reassigned to the Pacific? Were you kind of thinking about it or worried about it?

C: I didn't worry about it. I didn't know for sure. But when they took my tonsils out they said that they had never seen any tonsils that were as large as they were. Or they hadn't seen tonsils that large for many years.

T: Had you been sick over in England?

C: Yes.

T: So now they finally...

C: Caught up.

T: Took care of it. Did you begin to feel better after your tonsils were out?

C: Oh, much better.

T: You weren't shipped out to the Pacific.

C: No.

T: Why was that?

C: I think because of my physical condition, my age. I don't know for sure. And then when I was in the hospital... oh... the war was over?

T: In Europe or the Pacific?

C: In the Pacific.

T: The war in the Pacific ended in August of '45.

C: Yes.

T: So you were in the hospital again when the war in the Pacific ended?

C: Yes, I think I was. Because I can remember the people on the streets. Oh, gosh!

T: Was this in Denver?

C: In Denver.

T: Do you recall V-J Day? The surrender of Japan.

C: Yes.

(1, B, 415)

T: How did that impact you or make you feel personally?

C: I was glad that things were going to be over. People could get back to their normal living again. And having five brothers in it kind of bothered me. I was the oldest of the five.

T: Did you worry about your brothers?

C: Somewhat. My brother next to me was in the medics. He was in Germany. They took over Orange Hospital. He had some narrow escapes.

T: Was he with an infantry unit?

C: No, he was with the field hospital.

T: So he was in Germany and you were back in the States. What do you remember about what happened around you on V-J Day?

C: I don't really remember. I think I was in the hospital.

T: What was going on in Denver?

C: I guess everybody went wild. I recall there was no real personal injuries or anything.

T: So people came out of it okay. One of the reasons that the war in Japan ended so quickly was the decision of the US Government to use atomic weapons against the Japanese. At that time, did you feel our government was correct to use atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki?

C: You know the old saying: All is fair in love and war. They would have used it if they'd had it. I thought it was fair.

T: How have your feelings changed on that question since 1945?

C: It ended the war. It probably could have gone on for several years if they hadn't used the atomic bomb and ended it.

T: Do you still feel we did the right thing?

C: I think so. If the enemy had it they would have used it.

T: By October of '45 you were discharged and you were a civilian again.

C: The 31st of October, Halloween night.

T: There's a good omen for you. You got discharged and it wasn't long after that that you were married, right?

C: Five days.

T: Can you tell me on tape the story of that and why you got married so fast?

C: She wouldn't get married as long as I was in the service. She wouldn't want to travel.

T: But you had already proposed to her and she had accepted.

C: Yes.

T: She was waiting until you had your uniform off.

C: Right. She would go out with me. We'd go all different places with me being a uniform. At that time you had to wear the uniform. You couldn't dress in civilian clothes.

T: She didn't like being out with you in uniform?

C: No, she didn't mind that. But she just didn't want to travel.

T: The life of a soldier you mean?

C: Yes. She was twenty-eight and I was thirty when we got married.

T: The two of you stayed in Denver for a few years after the war.

C: Yes.

T: How did you decide that that was a good place to stay? Neither one of you were from there.

C: She was in Denver. She was living in Denver at the time.

T: So it was okay to her to stay there for a while.

C: Yes.

T: How about you? How did you feel about staying in Denver, Colorado?

C: I had a good job. I was a mechanic. The shop that I was working at was doing a lot of remodeling. They had a steel and iron works and they sent me down there.

T: This was in Denver too?

C: Yes. The same company.

T: Were jobs easy to come by after the war?

C: I didn't have any problems.

T: Was that because of the skills that you had?

C: I think so. I think so.

T: When you looked at what you were being paid, did you consider you were paid well, okay, or not so well?

C: I guess I was satisfied.

T: You didn't go looking for another job, did you?

C: No, but I was begged to go back to my old job.

T: Here in Minnesota?

C: In Minnesota.

T: That was a couple years, you said, right, before you came back to Minnesota?

C: Yes. We came back here. I think it was Memorial Day weekend that we left Denver.

T: So in '47 you left Denver and came back to McGregor, Minnesota. You'd lived in McGregor before you went into the service.

C: Oh, yes. I was born and raised in that area.

T: Now, if you left to go to the service in '42 and here it is '47, you've been away from McGregor, the area, for five years now. How was the community different?

C: I didn't notice any difference. I knew everybody and everybody knew me I guess.

T: So, the same folks pretty much still living there.

C: Yes.

T: Do you feel that the war helped to bring the community together at all or to make people closer?

(1, B, 521)

C: I don't know. I couldn't say. No small town... they were pretty close. Before the war and they were still close during the war and after the war.

T: When you moved back to McGregor did you think that was the right place for you to be then?

C: I didn't know.

T: How come?

C: There were changes made. We were newly married. I had to quit the garage work because of my health.

T: When did you go to work at Diamond Match in Cloquet? When was that?

C: Now, you've got me.

T: You retired in 1977. How many years did you work at Diamond Match?

C: Twenty-one years.

T: So you went there in 1956. When you were over there in England, part of the war effort, the war was right over there in France and Germany, what did the war mean for you personally at that time?

C: I can't really say. I thought we were there for a purpose. Get it settled so we could go back to living a normal life.

T: For you, would you say it was more a job to do or a moral crusade?

C: Probably a little of both. If we didn't stop what was going on God only knows would have become of it. We probably wouldn't be living the way we are today.

T: How do reflect on World War II now when you think back to almost sixty years ago?

C: It was something that I think had to be done. We had to look out for ourselves.

T: Look out for ourselves or the rest of the planet too?

C: The rest of the planet too.

T: How do you think your war experience changed your life?

C: I can't really say. Of course my life changed coming back and starting a family. We were on our own. I'd say we've done well. We raised a nice family. Our oldest son is taking real good care of us. I can't drive anymore. They took the car away from me. I was out of my mind, you know. Didn't know where I was, what I was doing.

T: One thing I wanted to ask you before we turn the tape off. When you were living in Denver, after you got out of the service after the war ended, you and Edna were married. Was it hard to find an apartment?

C: No. Edna was working with a young lady and her folks were railroad people. I don't know if he was a depot agent or what he was. They were moving out and this lady knew that Edna was getting married. We just took over.

T: Was it furnished?

C: No, not really. We still had to buy some stuff.

T: Did you consider yourself lucky to have a place?

C: You better believe it. It wasn't easy to find a place. It was in a real nice community.

T: And the rent was reasonable?

C: I don't remember what it was but we lived with it.

T: You considered yourself lucky to have found a place without a great deal of searching.

C: Yes. It was two bedrooms and we rented out one bedroom so that helped to pay the rent.

T: I see. Because things were in demand you could rent the extra room out to someone else.

C: Oh, yes. She was a nurse and he was a night man. Some restaurant or something.

T: So there were four of you living in the apartment then?

C: Yes.

T: You and Edna and this other couple.

C: We never saw them

T: They came and went different times.

C: Yes. I worked days and those people worked nights. She was a night nurse and he worked nights.

T: So it worked out okay.

C: All right.

T: That says something about how scarce the housing was if four people split in a two-room apartment.

C: I couldn't say. I didn't pay that much attention to it.

T: Anything you want to add to our discussion?

C: No. I'm just glad that we won the war and that we got to normal living again.

T: For the record, thanks very much.

END OF INTERVIEW