

# Seventy years a NEIGHBOR

Camp Atterbury native remembers post history

By John Crosby

CAMP ATTERBURY PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Camp Atterbury was born from Indiana farmland, rising from the fields of two townships that once provided families with crops and livestock, and used the soil to train men to fight, feeding the World War II war machine.

The Japanese attacks on Pearl Harbor in 1941 lit the fuse that kicked the War Department's plans for a central Indiana Army camp into action. An estimated 600 families were uprooted from their sleepy, 100-year-old farm towns of Kansas and Pigsah, and forced to sacrifice their land for a greater good: victory over the Axis Powers in Nazi-occupied Europe and the Japanese empire in the Pacific.

One such man, Herman Johnson, now 87 years old, made this sacrifice, but he didn't move far. He was born on Feb. 26, 1923, and raised during the Great Depression on what is now today's 92nd Division Street at Camp Atterbury. Perhaps it was convenience, stubborn nature or just fate that drove Johnson to pack his things and moved a few hundred yards up the road when his family's property was condemned in 1942. He still resides in that same home today just outside the camp's razor-wire fence.

From his home, he witnessed the quiet countryside he grew up on turn into a sprawling military post, producing hundreds of thousands of combat-ready troops. He watched as the "The Great War" was followed shortly by the Korean War. He witnessed the post lay almost dormant in subsequent years when the Department of the Army turned it over to the Reserves. He watched the camp spring into action again after the terrorist attacks on 9/11. Johnson has lived at Camp Atterbury's doorstep for more than 65 years and continues to watch history being made.

"Atterbury's been about 90 percent of my life," said Johnson laughing, "I just can't seem to get away from it."

As a younger man, Johnson worked at a factory cutting sheet metal when the government condemned his home. Nevertheless, he still attempted to enlist in the military, but was denied because of medical reasons. After moving into his new house up the road, he sought work with the war effort at Camp Atterbury, helping build new complexes for the influx of Soldiers to come.

"They wanted to get this camp built," said Johnson. "Anyone who could drive a nail or saw a board, they hired them. And they worked daylight 'till after dark, seven days a week."

Between February and August of 1942, more than 1,700 buildings were constructed for the oncoming surge. On June 2, 1942, Camp Atterbury Headquarters cut its first order, rendering the post operational.

Johnson found work there with the Civil Service as a truck driver for the post motor pool, the beginning of an ongoing working relationship with the camp.

"The first vehicle I drove up here was a ton-and-a-half Ford truck," said Johnson. "It was painted olive drab. One day I looked at the grill of the truck and saw something shiny. I knew Army vehicles weren't supposed to have anything shiny on them so I took my fingernail and scratched at it and the paint chipped right off. I could see chrome.

"Well, I kept going and after about a week and a half I had the first-ever Army truck with an all-chrome grill," Johnson said, laughing. "See, what it was, was the Army needed vehicles so bad they bought civilian vehicles right off the assembly line and slapped GI paint on them. [The grill] didn't last very long 'cause boy, after my first inspection, they slapped more paint on it."

Working as a truck driver he hauled everything from barbed



Herman Johnson holds a Nazi pin he found in a warehouse during World War II at Camp Atterbury while he was a truck driver for the civil service there. (Photo by John Crosby)



Herman Johnson stands next to the Camp Atterbury Rock in 1944. The rock was carved by an Italian prisoner of war housed there. The rock still sits in the same spot today, welcoming Soldiers and civilians to the post and reminding them of the camp's origins. (Photo Courtesy of Herman Johnson)

wire to chlorine water purification cylinders. He hauled welding equipment for ongoing construction and oxygen tanks for the post's medical facility, Wakeman Hospital, one of the largest, most technologically advanced hospitals in the nation at that time. But Johnson's bread and butter came from working at the post Bakery and Officer's Club.

Johnson had his first interaction with enemy prisoners-of-war in this job, as more than 15,000 German and Italian POWs poured into the camp's POW compound. Although fraternization was explicitly forbidden, many POWs held jobs throughout the camp, making it difficult to avoid direct contact with them.

Johnson worked directly with German POWs, as a handful was assigned to help him load and unload his truck.

"I didn't speak a word of German," said Johnson smiling. "They couldn't tell a crate of butter that goes in the refrigerator from a crate of beans that go in the pantry. [The German prisoners] couldn't pronounce my name. They'd call me "human." They'd ask "was ist das, human" or 'what is this?'"

"If I goofed up, they'd tell me something in German," continued

Johnson, laughing. "They could've been givin' me a mouth full of cuss words but I'd never have known it!"

He built lasting relationships with the officers at the officer's club and they gave him more responsibility. He would travel 40 miles each way to Indianapolis hauling food and supplies. This was no easy task due to the government's rationing sanctions

was 35 miles an hour to get better gas mileage and to save the tires on your vehicle."

During trips in Indiana's icy winter, Johnson would wrap all of

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## Unit Anniversary

### Utah military intelligence unit celebrates 50 years

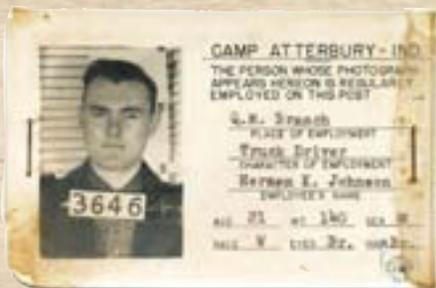
A handful of original members of the 142nd Military Intelligence Linguist Company, which was created Feb. 12, 1960, joined dozens of other current and former members of the 142nd Military Intelligence Brigade, and its sister unit, the 141st MIB, in Draper Headquarters auditorium in February to honor the unit and its members' service.

Having suffered from a lack of proficient linguists during conflicts in World War II and Korea, they founded and based the linguist company at Fort Douglas to take advantage of the unusually high number of foreign-language speakers in Utah.

The 142nd soon grew to include 90 members speaking a variety of languages to include German, French, Italian, Dutch, Swedish, Danish, Norwegian, Finnish, Greek, Spanish, Portuguese, Japanese, Korean and Chinese.

The company was reorganized as the 142nd Military Intelligence Battalion in 1980 and later was divided into two battalions (the 141st and 142nd) in 1988, thus creating the 300th Military Intelligence Brigade.

The 300th currently manages over 1,600 linguists in eight states, half of which reside in Utah, and who collectively speak and are trained in over 25 languages.

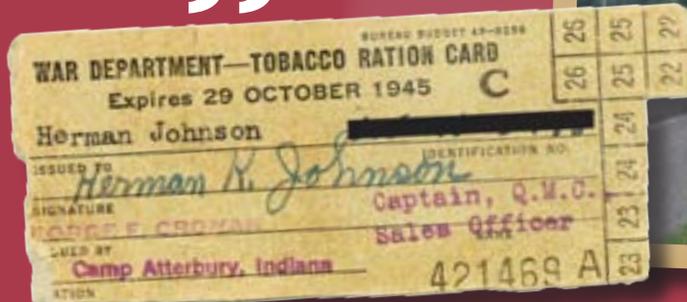


Johnson's Civil Service identification card he used to gain access to Camp Atterbury in 1942. (Courtesy photo)

set on the nation.

"Food was rationed, gas was rationed, the shoes on your feet were rationed, hell, even the speed was rationed," said Johnson. "If you were traveling to Indianapolis or Chicago or Louisville, the speed limit

“ Food was rationed, gas was rationed, the shoes on your feet were rationed, hell, even the speed was rationed ”



his produce and supplies in heavy Army blankets to keep them from freezing. His safe driving and reliable hauling secured him a job at the camp until after the war.

Johnson recalls the abrupt end of the war in Japan. “The [atomic] bomb dropped and everyone went crazy,” said Johnson. “I was in the officer’s club and I heard someone screaming. He came running through the French doors with both fists in the air, hollering. I thought he was throwing a fit. ‘It’s over!’ he said ‘It’s over!’”

A convalescent home was being built to add more beds to the already huge 9,000-bed Wakeman Hospital, which was overflowing with wounded at the time. “When the carpenters heard the news they threw their tools up in the air and left,” said Johnson.

“We all thought it was great,” Johnson continued. “It only took two bombs to end the whole war. We didn’t know we’d be still indirectly fighting over nuclear energy today.”

The flow of troops continued through Camp Atterbury after the war was over. It was transformed into a “separation center” to discharge and out-process returning Soldiers from overseas.

“The war ending was a huge relief on everyone,” said Johnson. “Everyone was focused on getting the Soldiers home.”

In 1946, Wakeman Hospital disbanded and operations at the post began to wind down. Johnson was finally laid off from the Civil Service in 1948. He went back to work in a factory in Columbus, Ind., and enjoyed the peace.

Peace, however, was short lived as the Korean War broke out in 1950. Camp Atterbury again opened its gates and his quiet community was interrupted by hundreds of thousands of busy men, the sounds of gunfire and artillery explosions and tanks tearing up the dirt roads around his home day and night, winter and summer.

“War makes everybody hurt, civilians and the military,” said Johnson, adding that civilians were willing to share the hardships with Soldiers and make sacrifices to support them.

Johnson chose to return to the post to take back his old job working for the Civil Service until the post shut down again after the Korean War.



Herman Johnson may have seen these muddy and tired 28th Infantry Division Soldiers from the Pennsylvania Army National Guard marching back to their barracks after training at Camp Atterbury in May 1951. Courtesy photo.

Camp Atterbury has always been a huge part of Johnson’s life and today, nearly 70 years after Camp Atterbury’s construction, he connects with the camp through the post museum, the post commander and the Soldiers that deploy through the mobilization platform to fight the Global War on Terrorism.

He maintains a collection of letters from old post commanders, pictures and other memorabilia and he stays involved with the Former Landowner’s Association; a group of former landowners and descendants of former landowners who lived on property that was acquired by Camp Atterbury. They convene annually, on land previously owned by Camp Atterbury, at Johnson County Park, across the street from today’s post’s gates.

Johnson has seen Camp Atterbury dwindle and he’s seen it flourish

but all the while his roots have remained firmly planted. His house may have been taken but his heart and soul will always be a part of post history. !

The Army Guard's Best Warrior Competition takes place July 27 - Aug. 2 at Fort Benning, Ga.



# Congratulations to the Outstanding Airmen of the Year



Senior  
NCO



Honor Guard  
Program Manager



NCO



Honor Guard  
Member



Airman



First  
Sergeant