

**Philip H. Johnson
Veteran**

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New York State Military Museum
Interviewers**

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**Days Inn,
Hicksville, New York**

Q: Could you give me your full name, date of birth, and place of birth please?

PJ: Oh, just Philip Howard Johnson. One, twenty-eight, twenty is my birth (date). Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Q: What was your educational background prior to entering military service?

PJ: Graduate of Gamaliel Bradford Senior High School in Wellesley, Massachusetts.

Q: Now you joined the service in July of 1940?

PJ: Yes.

Q: Were you drafted or did you enlist?

PJ: I enlisted.

Q: You picked the Army Air Core? Why did you pick that?

PJ: Yes, because that's the type of life I wished, to be in something connected with aviation.

Q: Had you ever had experience with aviation?

PJ: Only going around the local airports and helping watch airplanes and got a couple free rides and stuff like that but it was what I wanted to do to be one part of aviation, either flying or on the ground. It didn't matter which.

Q: Where were you inducted into the service?

PJ: I think in Boston.

Q: Where did you go for your training?

PJ: I went to a place called Fort Slocum, New York and then from there Fort Dix

Q: When did you get special Air Force training?

PJ: I didn't get it because I was in the army, the Army gave us that. It was particular, it was basic training. Yes, basic training that's right.

Q: Did you do anything to ready yourself to go into the Air Corps?

PJ: I went to a school.

Q: What kind of specialized schooling did you receive?

PJ: Well when I graduated from it, I was an air operations specialist which is the Army's fancy way of saying that I was in the air operations clique.

Q: What were some of the things you did?

PJ: See, I went from Boston to Fort Slocum. Fort Slocum we got on a troop ship and we went through the Panama Canal, we didn't stop we went all the way through to I think it was Fort [Unclear] out there on the west coast and we hung around there until the boat was ready to go and then off we went and went to Hickam, it's now Hickam Air Force Base, then it was Hickam Field. That was run by the Army Air Forces then and that's when I got my training and we went to school there. Then I was transferred to Bellows Field on the windward side of the island that was where I was with an outfit, it was an operation already, "Thunder Squadron P40s". We had O47's and 1049's. I was working there and I maintained pilot flying time and a lot of it (was) administrative duties and stuff like that. That's what I did, that was my job.

Q: What do you remember about December 7th?

PJ: The whole nine yards, the whole thing. Because I remember that we'd been on and off these sabotage alerts during and prior to December the seventh and this time we'd just come off of sabotage alert. Usually at the end of those sabotage alerts they would try to spread out the airplanes, in case of another one occurring, they wouldn't come in, I mean they wouldn't hit the aircraft which were at dispersed locations. After that was over, it was a Saturday and they said they will do that Monday morning, we will disperse the aircrafts again Monday morning, so that meant we were off Saturday night and all-day Sunday. Sunday morning, we got up, two or three others and I, and we were going to try to fool around at the base of this mountain. There was a mountain range right outside of Hickam. We thought we'd try to get that, there was several of us, I guess three or four, we went to the mess hall and had a hearty breakfast of GI pancakes and from there off we went to the main road. When we were walking along the road to the mountainside, this guy, a Filipino, came towards us driving a taxi. See there was a naval air station up beyond us, and he was all over the road, and he finally stopped and the cab was riddled with bullets. He telling us, "Japanese, Japanese" so I mean we couldn't believe it but he should know, well his cab was living proof.

Q: Now you couldn't hear the attack at all?

PJ: Nothing yet, then so we headed back to the base. Just as we came through the gate, well they said, "Here they come! The Japanese! Air raid! Air raid!" and so forth. I dove underneath a tug, which was used for [unclear] aircraft, and it was straddling a water drain and that's where I had a ringside seat whole, old show and they came over with fighters and they were there [unclear] and they had perfect aim at the aircraft, which were parked nose to tail, wingtip to wingtip. They just, believe me, just set it up at us, fight after flight of aircraft, there they were and they had a field day just zapping them, one after another. Of course, it caught on fire and everything had a real bonfire exploding ammunition and everything else. Then they also worked over this O49, which was just an observation aircraft but they thought it was something special I think, because there was run after run on that airplane, it was a big wide wing airplane and it was used for observation. I mean it was no speed demon or anything like that, it was terrible. I mean it's just a plain old observation aircraft, that's all it was. Finally, they left.

Q: Now were any of the planes able to get off the ground?

PJ: No, they were burning, a couple of pilots tried to get off. One was shot down as he was running for his airplane and another one was off the ground, had his gear up and everything and the zapped him there, that was it. We tried to get two airplanes off the ground and that was a no go, they're both killed of course in that attempt, but then again we saw a B-17 on its way in after that, and that was one of the old B-17s being ferried over from the states, so I mean he had a whole flock of them on his tail. So, he brought the airplane in on a wheels up landing, and it's a short runway because it was a base full of fighters only, the B-17 skidded right to the end of it and over the end of the runway. The crew punched out of that airplane as fast as they could, headed for anything they could find as a hiding spot. They worked it over for a while but that was the end of that, they took off. So finally, they decided it was all clear, so I get up from my spot, I looked around and there was a mess of a sight to behold. The smell of burning rubber and gasoline and the flight line was a mess, this is what I say at first, "An operational ready fighter squadron that was ready to go, and now it was nothing but junk." Then it dawned on me what had happened, I couldn't believe it, I couldn't believe what I was seeing. Well, I was there and I saw it. I then went up to the squadron orderly room in the building everybody else in the squadron was there. Two of them milling around and no water or anything like that, they couldn't get their guns, the guns were locked away and well the supply sergeant was shackled up with some girl in Honolulu. They got the guns out anyhow but they were packed in Cosmoline and their 30 caliber machine guns and gas masks and all that, including Springfield 03 rifles and rounds of ammunition, and this is all world war one stuff, and ten helmets and that's what we had. So, we're in the orderly

room and everybody is milling around and no one seemed to know what is going on next. The first sign you could see that people were on the verge of doing something because it was just a complete mess there. He spoke to the squadron commander, the squadron commander got everyone together and told them exactly what had happened that Fort Wheeler, Hickam, and our field, plus a couple of other training bases were hit. Pearl Harbor was gone completely, a complete wash, nothing was there. So, he said, "Well we've got to do something". So, we decided to set up. I mean everybody's going to pull guard duty, some had never pulled guard duty before but they were to pull now. I was given word if you see any small submarines those are Japanese submarines, they have a crew of three and they might beach themselves and try to get off. So that's another thing, all of us along the beach were told to keep our eyes peeled for something like that. From that time on, the first day was the worst of all, so we finally get squared away and establish some sort of order among the people and so forth. Then from there after a while, a week or ten days or so, things began to shape up because we were transferred to Kauai and there we found we were going to be with the B24 squadron which was on its way to the central pacific areas and it was there that they were being trained, flights and stuff like that. I assumed my duties, I don't remember too much about that at all, but I knew I was there and knew what was going on but at first it was like a nightmare the next was just a follow on to that. We finally got everything in order, and we went to the Ellice Islands in the central Pacific, there are three islands there was Butaritari and Makin, and another who I have forgotten. Then we started bombing then the airplanes came in and they had coral of runways and the airplanes would be located underneath the palm trees and couldn't be seen that well. That's when we were down there and there wasn't any particular action there other than the fact to get Washington team Charlie every so often that came over, so we were there and then we stayed and we were bombing this one Japanese rocks being held and had been since the war started and it was a tremendous mess. It was strongly fortified and so forth, but we finally got that, we were bombing that and the navy was going at it, they invaded with marines and then I remember this in particular because I thought it was rather unsatisfactory way in which they handled it, but this general in charge of the marines whose name was H.M. Smith, they called him howling mad smith, because his only way he would solve a problem was to send more men in. That's what sort of general he was and he had no strategies or this or that, he would just send more men in. This thing they went into the [unclear] and the landing craft got hooked up on submerged tank traps and so the only way to get to shore was to punch out of the landing craft and go ashore, causing Japanese to break them back and forth with machine gun fire, so howling mad Smith sent more men in, that's what he did. From there we went back to Hawaii and got ready for a Kwajalein and I think we were bombing Kwajalein from Hawaii, from this island

there. We went to another one after that, in the meantime I was still maintaining my job, well by now I guess I was a sergeant or something. We had a base operation and I was taking charge of that and we also had to secure foxholes in the woods, which we could jump in and be covered up in case of attacks. From there we went to Saipan and it was at that time they were just getting things going with B29s and stuff like that. B24s for us (were) sort of a second rate because it didn't have the range that a B29 had. I had enough points at that time to go home, so I went home and I was discharged from the army as a [unclear] sergeant and went to school at the University of Vermont.

Q: Now these islands you mentioned, Tarawa, [unclear], [unclear], Saipan, the bombers that left from your base, were you bombing these islands, or did they end up moving there and establishing airfields?

PJ: Yes, we conquered all those islands and also Tarawa but we never used Tarawa for our allies or anything as I remember.

Q: I don't think it was ever used as a forward base; I think it had two airfields on it but I don't think they ever used it. Okay so you went home, did you recall how you felt when you heard of the death of President Roosevelt.

PJ: No, well I never voted for him anyhow. Didn't think much of it, tell you the truth.

Q: I know you were out of service by then, but how did you feel about the dropping of the atomic bombs on Japan?

PJ: I thought it was great. That was the Enola Gay. Yes, I thought it was necessary, most necessary because the lives were saved and everything. I mean it was an awful thing but it had to be done, I thought.

Q: Have you ever seen the crew of Enola Gay? Was that the base where you worked?

PJ: No.

Q: When you left service did you use the GI bill to go to University of Vermont?

PJ: Yes, I did.

Q: Did you ever use it for anything else?

PJ: To take flying lessons. I got that because I didn't go in for pilot training when I was on active duty because in my teens, I had a mastoid operation and they remove something which according to my flight surgeon, would disqualify me from high altitude flying. He said you're okay at 25,000 feet and below, but nothing above that it would be too straining. So that's what I did there.

Q: Did you ever use the 5220 club?

PJ: After I got out of the service.

Q: How long did you use that?

PJ: I don't know.

Q: Did you join any veterans' organizations?

PJ: Well I joined the Air Force Association. I think that was it, I never belonged to the American Legion of the VFW or anything like that, I belonged to the Air Force Association. Just local outfits which I belong to now, but now they're old guys my age.

Q: Do you have a Pearl Harbor survivors' group here?

PJ: I think so but I'm not a part of it, I'm not a member of it.

Q: Do you think your time in the service ever effected or changed your life in any way?

PJ: Yes, I think it gave me a lot of stability that I never had before. I saw things that I never would have seen otherwise and it taught me to accept responsibility as I was given and do what you're told. Especially when some sergeant with about a zillion years of service tells you to do it, you better do it now. It wasn't all that way, some were, and some weren't. You knew you better do what he told you or else he'd have you out floating, some sort of court martial. I mean it wasn't fright, it was just that you knew you had to do what he told you and that's it.

Q: So, you later became an officer in the reserve?

PJ: Yes well, that was another thing. The air force when they were separated from the army were short officers and they were looking in particular for NCLs who would be interested in a reserve commission in the Air Force. Of course, you wouldn't be recounted if you acted rudely, it would just be going to meetings and everything. It would be the inactive reserve and that's all there was to it. So, I said yeah, I'll take that. This was at the time of the Korean War, when it really got hard. I woke up one morning and found again a letter, recalling me that I've been granted a commission and everything like that. This was another letter with a dramatic tune to ordering me to active duty. I was first stationed up in Saint Albans, Vermont, they had a radar sight up there. Then I went and stayed there. I was told I was going to be sent overseas so where did I go but to Japan. The first job I got was a commander of an airport of a base on [unclear], it was a ready base, in other words a Japanese place which is in perfect condition, concrete runways and hangars and everything, they weren't touched they were just as they were before. It was called [unclear] and you could look up and see Sokka (?). You all come over the base but they would get up there and they'd fly around and check out [unclear] where the Russians were, they had aircraft up there. Our point of what we had was to operate a ready base and supply the aircraft with fuel, ammo, and whatever they needed plus sleeping quarters. We had a number of airmen who were highly skilled mechanics, communications, and stuff like

that, (there were) about twenty, twenty-one in this group and I was the commander. I would maintain the base; I'd maintain contact with the mayor of the town of [unclear]. We would service F86 which came in from the bases around Tokyo, they came up on a training flight. They would top off the tanks of the airplane and then head for [unclear] and then they had to get just so far from [unclear] knowing full well that they alerted the Russians and they're probably scrambling to what was going on. Then they pull back and head back for the bases they came from and that's what they were supposed to do, just keep the Russians on edge, keep them away. They figured that the Russians would go into Japan, they wanted it, and I mean they were going to get into the Korean War but they never did do that, but they thought they might and they wanted to be ready for them when that happened. That was a nice assignment. I had that for about eighteen months and they needed a fuels officer down at [unclear], which is the big, big base in Northern [unclear]. I was the petroleum officer for that and they had a load of fuel in that base too. I mean they had dependence stations there and we had not only jet fuel but other aviation fuels. We had home heating products and all that stuff. So that was my main job while I was there for the rest of the time. We used to [unclear] fuel fighters and all that stuff, in fact one of the things I've got here, (leans forward to reach for item), one of the pictures that I was going to throw away, which I did throw away and then later saved.

Q: Do you want to tell us about that? Are you in that picture? Where about are you?

PJ: Yes, I am. I'm the one that's got my hand resting on the wing of the airplane. We have a chief NCO that is there too. He's the one by the fire hydrant. The other one is one of the airmen refueling that F84 and these were at that time used for fighter escort aircraft and they were assigned to the strategic air command; it was some idea that Lemay had. He wanted to use the fighters to protect his bombers on runs. So, he'd use these F84 [unclear].

Q: Now, did you have any other photos there?

PJ: No, the only ones that I have there's no action. I got this picture here which I took out of the frame, I don't know if you want that or not.

Q: Well that's you stationed in Japan?

PJ: Yeah, I was in the reserves at this time. At this time, I was a major in the Air Force reserve.

Q: Do you know about what year that was taken?

PJ: Well, I'd say the late 60s and then I was promoted again but I don't have any picture.

Q: Now how much longer were you stationed in Japan? Were you there till the end of the Korean War?

PJ: No, I was thinking about almost three years I was there and then I went back. Just as soon as I got back, I was stationed in Great Falls, Montana and that's a good place to be far away from. I didn't like that very much at all. After that I decided well, I've got a good background in aviation fuels and stuff, so I asked to be transferred to the already reserved and that's where I stayed until I was retired.

Q: When did you retire? Did you retire as a colonel?

PJ: I think it was '78. Lieutenant colonel and this was taken when I was a major.

Q: Well thank you very much.