

RICHARD JOHNSON

October 22, 2007

Fred Honhart,
Interviewer

Honhart: [Today is October] 22nd, and I'm with Dick Johnson. Dick, we're going to be recording you. Do we have your permission to record you for this?

Johnson: Yes, you may.

Honhart: Could you, just to sort of get started, tell us about what it was like when you were a boy growing up in Milwaukee?

Johnson: I think I had a normal youth. I lived in Milwaukee, on the west side of Milwaukee, went to school at a place called Knee Ska [phonetic] school, grade school, and I met Ralph in our junior high school, when we went to junior high school.

Honhart: When you're referring to Ralph, that's Ralph Turner.

Johnson: Ralph Turner, yes, that's right.

Honhart: But go back a little bit. What was your family? How many members were in your family?

Johnson: I had a family, a mom and dad and I have a sister and I had a brother. There were three of us in the family. Dad worked for Westinghouse Electric Corporation as an engineering salesman for the corporation, and he worked for them for forty years. Later on, I joined the corporation, too.

Honhart: What was the school like that you went to? What was your elementary school like?

Johnson: I can't remember too much of it, but it was a fairly new school. We had excellent teachers. One thing I remember was that one of our teachers, and I don't remember which one, organized six of us fellows, young fellows, probably in fifth grade, something like that, into a sextet for singing. It was so successful that we were asked to sing at several places, churches and stuff like that. Then Milwaukee Joe had a radio station in Milwaukee. I don't remember the call letters, but it was the Milwaukee's radio station. We sang over there several times as a sextet. That was a highlight that I remember. Otherwise, my education in grade school was quite normal, I would say.

My mother, before she was married, she was a concert pianist, and later on, she gave music lessons. When she met my dad, of course, then she tended the kids at home, all three of us. I had a younger brother, John Treater [phonetic], that died when he was only two months old. He had a heart defect, and he only lived to be two months old. But that was the gist of our family. My mom was of German descent. My dad was of Norwegian descent. My grandfather and grandmother, not very particularly, but their parents came from Alsace Lorraine territory over in Europe.

Honhart: What was the neighborhood like that you grew up in?

Johnson: Very normal, nice neighborhood, very middle-class neighborhood. Dad had the home built, so it was a newer home. We had very excellent neighbors and, of course, several of the neighbors' children that I grew up with became buddies of mine. One of them went to Marquette when I went to the University of Wisconsin. Where did the other one go? Don't remember at the time.

Honhart: What was the ethnic makeup of the neighborhood at that time?

Johnson: It was pretty much a mixture. None of them were first descendants or anything like that. They were all Americans from some time back of different lineages. We had only one or two Catholic families, and at that time a Catholic family was something different in the neighborhood. It wasn't to me, because a couple, they had a big family, and a couple of the boys were good friends of mine. But at that time, there was some—oh, I don't know what you'd call it. They weren't exactly—the mothers and fathers didn't want their children to play with Catholic children and that sort of nonsense. We had a Catholic school near us, and the kids in the Catholic family were good friends of mine. I didn't see any difference.

Honhart: So where did you meet Ralph? You said at junior high.

Johnson: I met Ralph in junior high school. We had what we called junior high school, but I think it was while I was seventh or eighth grade. When we went to high school, we only had the

three. We had the sophomore, junior, and senior years in senior high school. Ralph and I met because we both had interest in chemistry, and he had a very violent interest in chemistry. He lived for chemistry, and I enjoyed it, too. We'd get chemistry sets for Christmas, and he and I would combine our chemistry sets and do some experiments on our own, which, fortunately, we didn't blow up anything, but we used to do our experimenting down in Ralph's basement.

Ralph lived out on the north end of Milwaukee. His dad was a superintendent of a cemetery, and they had a beautiful home right on the cemetery, and a beautiful basement that Ralph and I did our experimenting in. We spent a lot of time playing in the area. It was on the outskirts of Milwaukee, so it was a very wild area, and Ralph and I used to spend time in the woods, and that was when we were in junior high school. We remained friends all the way through high school, Ralph continuing his interest in chemistry, and I gravitated toward engineering, so that when we graduated we both went to Wisconsin at the same time. He went into the chemical department, and I went into the electrical engineering department, but, of course, we saw each other socially.

Neither Ralph nor I at that stage had any interest in girls. We found our pastimes much more interesting than girls, I guess. I remember that even when we got to be seniors in high school, we wanted to go to the prom and neither one of us had a girlfriend. So we had to scout around, and we finally found a girl, a casual friend of one of ours. I don't know whether it was me or Ralph. She had a sister, so we took the two sisters to the prom and had a wonderful time. But that was the last we saw of them. Then when we got into college, and Ralph and I, we were both freshmen in college, both of us, of course, knew Arnella.

Honhart: How did you know Arnella? Was she in school with you?

Johnson: Oh, yes, she was in school with us. In high school, Ralph and I ran around with a gang of boys and girls, and we didn't pair off, and we'd usually travel in a group, and there wasn't any, usually, pairing off. When we got to college, why, I started going with Arnella, and, of course, she knew Ralph, too. She decided Ralph was a little more her style than me, so she dumped me. But by that time, she was going to Milwaukee Downer [phonetic] College, which is a girls' school in Milwaukee, and she had a good friend, Halley Wolf [phonetic], and she introduced me to her. Halley and I hit it off, and so the four of us double-dated all the time. We had all kinds of fun together, went to dances together and all kinds of activity together when we were freshmen in college. All the girls were in Milwaukee, and we were in Madison, Wisconsin, of course.

Then I joined a fraternity. Ralph never joined the fraternity. I joined the fraternity, and the story I gave Arnella was Arnella's birthday party, and I gave Halley my fraternity pin and told her what the significance was. She decided she was not ready for that kind of commitment, so she dumped me. But Ralph was still going with Arnella.

Then we were in Madison and we spent most of our—oh, we'd come home for our vacations. I hadn't dated very seriously, but Ralph kept going with Arnella, and eventually when we graduated from college, I graduated in four years of electrical engineering degree, but Ralph stayed on in his graduate work at the college and set up several classes in pathology, which was his forte. He loved that and so he stayed, and I think he had a master's, pathology or chemistry or something. I don't know what it was.

Honhart: Chemistry, I believe. I'd have to check it out. I think it was chemistry.

Johnson: Do you remember? I think it was chemistry, yes.

Honhart: I know he worked with Matthews, Roy Matthews.

Johnson: Yes. That name recalls. I remember that name.

Then after we got out of college, I got a job with Westinghouse Electric Corporation in Pittsburgh, and Ralph, I don't know if he went directly to the FBI or he was still—well, he was in college a couple of more years than I was, because he did graduate work in college. Then we kind of lost track of each other for a while there.

Honhart: Yes, he went to Kansas City.

Johnson: Before he went to Kansas City, he was in the FBI. I don't know where that was. I can't remember where that was. Then he took training in FBI. Then, of course, the Kansas City Police Department picked him up and he was in the pathology department and was interested in developing pathology in terms of criminology. He joined the two. I can't tell you how many years he was out in Kansas City, but it was a time while I in the meantime had gone with Westinghouse, transferred to several places, come back to Detroit and went in the service.

While I was in the service, he was at Kansas City. When I got out of the service, I was a radio operations officer and captain, so I didn't get discharged. I got put on inactive duty. As an officer, you don't get discharged; you're put on inactive duty. I was in California at that time,

and on our way back from California we stopped in to see Ralph and Arnella and stayed with them for several days in Kansas City.

I went back to Detroit, joined up with Westinghouse, and I had my job. They saved my job for me. In the meantime, Ralph was picked up by Michigan State and came to Michigan State University and became very active in setting up pathology, criminology, police administration work at Michigan State. I don't know if he ever became the head of the police administration.

Honhart: No.

Johnson: But he effectively did most of the work.

Honhart: He did a lot of the work, certainly. That's darn right, yes.

Johnson: Then of course we picked up our acquaintance again, because of Michigan State being in Lansing, and so we used to see each other several times a year. The girls got along. My wife at that time got along very well. That's a picture right there. She's a gal I met in Detroit, and I married her, a wonderful gal. Then she and Arnella got along very well, and so we saw each other socially from now on.

Then Ralph, with his beautiful home out in Okemos, and if we couldn't spend more time, what we used to do, we'd meet in Brighton—I think it's Brighton, Michigan, about halfway between Detroit and Lansing, and we'd meet there for dinner at the Canopy, which was a favorite restaurant and a very fine restaurant in Brighton. That way we saw each other more

often. We'd meet there and spend the evening together there. Of course, for social functions, we always saw each other, too.

Boy, did I run out already? How much more do you want?

Honhart: Shall I ask you some questions?

Johnson: You ask questions.

Honhart: One of the things I've heard about is—

Johnson: You know Ralph wrote two books on pathology.

Honhart: Yes.

Johnson: I've got one around here someplace. I don't know where it is.

Honhart: One of the things I've picked up on, and I wondered if he ever talked to you about this, is that when he was growing up and his father was the superintendent of the cemetery, that he would take pictures of the deceased and for the families. That was a common practice back then. Did he ever talk about that?

Johnson: Take pictures of the what?

Honhart: The people in their coffins.

Johnson: Oh, I never knew that.

Honhart: You didn't know that?

Johnson: I didn't even know that. Boy. I knew he was a great photographer. That was one of the things I forgot to tell you about. He was a great photographer, that's right.

My dad a Leica camera, one of the first Leica cameras. He had a customer that went over to Germany, so he gave him money to buy a Leica camera. That was before they were in this country at all. Ralph and my dad swapped photography. My dad was quite a photographer, too, and when my dad died, he gave me his Leica. I was not much of a photographer. I didn't have that much interest in it, and I gave Ralph my dad's Leica, and Ralph was so excited about it. He thought that was the most wonderful thing in the world, because he appreciated it.

Honhart: Oh, yes, absolutely. Yes, he and I shared an interest in photography.

Johnson: Photography? Yes. He thought this camera—and it still worked. It was an old-model Leica, but it still worked. I got a letter that he wrote me, he couldn't thank me enough.

[laughs]

Honhart: I know he appreciated, knowing Ralph.

Johnson: No, I didn't know anything about this other thing.

Honhart: He would later by several Leicas, in fact.

Johnson: Oh, yes, he had several of them. Oh, yes, right.

Honhart: One of the things I did for Arnella was after Ralph died, I was able to sell the Leica for her and got quite a bit of money for it.

Johnson: Oh, is that right? Wonderful.

Honhart: Yes, he had a beautiful one. I seriously thought about purchasing it for myself, and [unclear].

Johnson: It was a real late model, one of the later models?

Honhart: Yes, it was a late model, and it was quite expensive. The funny thing was, I worked with it a little bit and found I didn't like it.

Johnson: Is that right?

Honhart: Yes, otherwise I would have bought it. But I didn't really like it. I actually bought one of his other cameras.

Johnson: He used to have a, what do they call it, Rolleiflex?

Honhart: Yes.

Johnson: That's what he used most of the time that I heard.

Honhart: Yes, yes.

Johnson: What do they call them? They call them a—

Honhart: Twin lens reflex.

Johnson: Twin lens reflex Rolleiflex, that's right.

Honhart: Yes. He had that and he had some others.

Johnson: I'm sorry I can't help you on this other thing. I never knew it.

Honhart: That's okay.

Johnson: I never knew anything about it.

Honhart: Did he ever talk about doing work in the cemetery, or when you were growing up, about—

Johnson: Working in the cemetery, no. I don't know anything about that.

I remember one thing. After a party one night, and I probably shouldn't tell you this, it was when my dad worked for Westinghouse and he had a company car and the insurance is only good on the car for him. He used to let me drive it once in a while when I was over sixteen, but he was miserable because he knew if I got in an accident, he was in trouble, see.

Honhart: Sure.

Johnson: So, one night we were going to some dance someplace, I don't know, and I hated to ask him for the car because I knew what he went through when I asked. So I happened to ask Halley. I said, "Halley, is your dad using his car tonight?"

She said, "I don't think so."

"Well, do you suppose that he'd let me drive it and we could take it tonight when we go to this dance?" So we did. He let me have the car. I remember it was an old Packard or something, big, big old car of some kind. We had a great time, because we had a car, see, went to the dance.

After the dance before we took the girls home, I guess we—how did we get out to the cemetery? We were out at the cemetery for some reason. Maybe we'd been to Ralph's or something. But anyhow, I remember somebody, one of the girls—I'm sure it was one of the girls wanted me to drive the car over a couple of graves. [laughter] Of course, I did it, see. Oh,

God, we thought we were real devils, see. We didn't do any harm, but we actually drove over the graves. I'll never forget that [unclear], and, of course, nobody ever knew about it except the four of us. That was something in the cemetery.

But otherwise, the only other thing that we did was there was an airfield about another five miles further north from Ralph's place, out where he lived, which was out in the country, and I used to bicycle out to his place and then he'd get his bike and the two of us would drive out to this airport, because we loved to see airplanes take off and land, and we liked to just run around the airport. We used to do that quite frequently, because it was fairly close to where he lived, see.

Honhart: What time would this have been?

Johnson: Early thirties.

Honhart: Early thirties?

Johnson: Maybe, yes, I guess. Yes, it would be the early thirties. We were in high school until I graduated in '39 from college, though, with five. Yes, it would be early thirties, yes, '31, '32, something like that. I'm not very good on dates. I'm lucky if I can remember my kids' birthdays. [laughter]

Honhart: Yes, I know what you mean.

Johnson: What else we got? [laughter]

Honhart: Did you go up to when Ralph was building the house? Were you there when he—
was he under construction when you were there? Did you ever see him do work on the house?

Johnson: His house in, what is it?

Honhart: Okemos.

Johnson: Okemos, yes. No. Oh, no, I might have been there just once. They had us up one time. We went up for dinner, and he took me out and showed me it, yes. He was a Frank Lloyd Wright fan, you know, and he was always—I thought the houses Frank Lloyd Wright were the miserable, but he thought they were beautiful, and so he sort of designed his house after Frank Lloyd Wright's design. It's a beautiful home, blends right into the land. What am I trying to say?

Honhart: The landscape.

Johnson: Landscape, that's right. It was a beautiful layout, and I always remember, I said, "Ralph, what? Why?" I better watch my language. "Would you go out there?" There's nothing around. It was out in the middle of nothing, you know. Now, of course, it's a beautiful town, but when he built out there, he was one of the first ones and there was nothing around, just farmland around. I couldn't understand. I'm a city boy myself. I couldn't understand why he'd

want to build out in that area. But, boy, what a beautiful place, and Arnella is wonderful being able to—is she still there?

Honhart: Oh, yes, sure is.

Johnson: I don't think she was going to leave it. I tried to get her out of the place. Richard's tried to get her out of the place.

Oh, that was another thing, which I was very proud of, and still am. I was his best man at his wedding, and when their first boy was born, Richard, they named him after me and asked me to be his godfather. I didn't even know what a godfather was or what the responsibilities were for a godfather. So I had to do a little reading up on it, and I realized that he was a German Lutheran. I think his religion was German Lutheran. We were English Lutheran [unclear]. To me it didn't make any difference. Well, anyhow, that was a tradition in their religion to have godparents. Afterwards, I found out that if something had happened to Ralph and Arnella, it was my responsibility to see that this young man was brought up in the proper religion or proper upbringing and that sort of thing, too. Now, fortunately, it never happened so they didn't have to call on me.

But I'm really proud of this Richard. He's a great kid, boy.

Honhart: He sure is.

Johnson: I used to see him quite a bit when—where were they? Yes, we were in Lansing, I used to see him once in a while. Then, of course, he went to this college down in Kentucky,

Berea, Kentucky. He went to college down there, and then he was all around the country. But he's a wonderful sculptor and just a wonderful guy, and I had the most pleasant—I was out to visit Arnella a couple of years ago, I guess it was, and she didn't tell me. I came out and I came in. My daughter—no, I went out by myself. I was driving my car then. Sat down, and I'm sitting there, and in walks Richard, and I didn't know who the hell he was. [laughter] I didn't recognize him, because I hadn't seen him for so long.

Arnell says, "I thought you might be interested in my son is visiting me." [laughter]

Was I ever, and I said, "Richard, did you bring Sylvia with you? And I'm going to hate you if you didn't," because I just love Sylvia. Oh, god, what a doll. She is really something. She was my favorite gal. Being black means nothing to me, and you wouldn't know she was black anyhow because of the way she talked and the way she acted. Why, I remember the first time after we saw her and Richard were married, they came to visit their parents, and Ralph and Arnella had us out for dinner. We had dinner in—was it Webers? Webers, out in Ann Arbor [unclear], so it was part way.

Did they live in Ann Arbor? No, they didn't live in Ann Arbor. Well, why did we eat at this restaurant? This restaurant is right outside of Ann Arbor.

Honhart: Webers is right there.

Johnson: Yes, Webers is, but there's another one, too.

But anyhow, and it was the first time we meet Sylvia, and I have no objections to color, but it was still kind of an interesting, I guess I could see, that I'm meeting my godson's wife,

who is black, for the first time, see. Of course, I get choked up when I even tell about it, because I think so much of Sylvia. She's such a great kid.

Anyhow, we met them in this restaurant, in whatever restaurant it was—that's immaterial—in the lobby before we sat down, and, of course, Ralph sat Sylvia right next to me. I didn't talk to that gal for more than five minutes, and I didn't know she was colored, I didn't know she was black. She's just a girl, and a wonderful girl, just a delightful girl, and smart. I knew Richard wouldn't marry a dummy. [laughs] But, yes, she's a wonderful gal, and I've often wondered—I've seen pictures of the twins that they had, but I would have loved to had the opportunity to meet the twins. I guess they're very accomplished young ladies. One of them is married, isn't she?

Honhart: Yes, got married this summer.

Johnson: Or about to be married.

Honhart: No, got married this summer.

Johnson: This summer she got married?

Honhart: This summer she got married.

Johnson: I don't know about the other one, if she's going steady or—

Honhart: I think she has a steady boyfriend. Yes. I met them when they were—

Johnson: Both of the boys are white, too, aren't they?

Honhart: Yes.

Johnson: I think they are, yes.

Honhart: Well, I know the one that got married. I don't know about the other one.

Johnson: What a gal. Oh, Jesus.

We had a wonderful time that time when I went to visit Arnella, because Richard and Sylvia were there, and, of course, Sylvia was at the party, too. As I say, it was a real trip down memory lane, that party.

Honhart: Oh, I can imagine.

Johnson: And I hadn't seen Georgia for so long. What a charming gal she is, too, and I hadn't seen her for so long. I've talked to her on the phone several times, but I hadn't seen her, so I was looking forward to seeing her. And John, I hadn't seen John for ages. I wouldn't have recognized or known him. I wouldn't have recognized him at all. But what a great guy he is, too, what a background he's got.

Honhart: All the travels he's done.

Johnson: He's what you call an adventurer.

Honhart: Yes, he is. He certainly is.

Johnson: Go ahead, ask me another question about Ralph. We're supposed to be talking about Ralph.

Honhart: No, this is fine. I didn't know, for example, that you were Richard's godfather.

Johnson: I really go to know the whole family very well, knowing Ralph as well as I did, and Ralph and Arnella hit it off so well with my wife. They both thought she was wonderful, even though Halley was a friend of Arnella's until she died. I mean she was always a friend. That's where I kept track of Halley. I would ask Arnella once in a while, "Do you ever hear from my old girlfriend Halley?" and she'd tell me what she was doing, see. She had a very tragic experience, which we won't discuss. I don't think I'd ever married Halley, because she was a different type of personality that I really—she was an intelligent girl, too, very intelligent girl. She married a doctor. Then I got to see their two daughters. I hadn't met their two daughters. They were at the party, you know, and that was a real trip down memory lane, too, to meet them. I didn't realize that they were going to be there either, and I met their husbands, both nice guys. So I really enjoyed that, too.

Honhart: It was a good party.

Johnson: That was a heck of a party. I didn't know all of the people from Michigan State, the faculty members, but I had met a couple of them at other parties that we'd been to, and I enjoyed talking to Ralph's old boss's wife, what's her name? Who was head of that department? I can't remember.

Honhart: Torjanowitz [phonetic] was.

Johnson: I've met them on several occasions. I can't remember. Maybe I'll think of it.

Honhart: Branstetter [phonetic]?

Johnson: Branstetter, that's it. And I knew them, so Mrs. Branstetter and I had a very interesting—in fact, I had dinner with her. She sat at our table.

Honhart: Yes, I knew Art.

Johnson: Try me on something else.

[Begin Tape 1, Side B]

Honhart: We're starting side two.

You mentioned that you were in the service in the Second World War.

Johnson: Oh, yes.

Honhart: What exactly did you do while you were in the service?

Johnson: I was with Westinghouse when the war began, and I came back to Detroit, and I was in the Westinghouse district office there in Detroit when the war started. I had met my wonderful wife-to-be, and we had planned to get married, but she didn't want to get married until autumn because she liked to have her bridesmaids in different colored dresses. She never wanted to be a June bride, but guess what? [laughs]

Honhart: That changed.

Johnson: I decided that I was not going to be drafted as a G.I. With a college education, I thought it was silly that I should go in as a G.I. So I volunteered and tried to get in the Navy in the worst way, and they wouldn't take me because I had a history of hay fever when I was a kid. My buddy and I, we tried to get into together in there. He made it, and I didn't make it.

I wanted to be a pilot, couldn't be a pilot because my eyes; I was nearsighted. So I went in as an electrical engineer. I got a commission as an electrical engineering graduate and went in the Signal Corps and got in what the Signal Corps called an Electronics Training Group. It was a group that eventually we all trained together, but then we divided into two groups, a technical group and then the operations group. They shipped our butts over to England. I hadn't been

married one month, and I'm on my way over to England on the *Queen Mary* with 20,000 troops on board and left my dear bride on the shore. I put her on a train to Detroit, home to Detroit, with sixty-five dollars in her pocket. That's all we had between us. I spent a year over in England as a radar operations officer.

Honhart: What did that involve?

Johnson: That involved tactical operations of radar. England was far ahead of everybody in the use of radar. Fortunately, they were even ahead of the Germans in the use of radar. So the Americans figured they'd send this group, there was a group of thirty of us, over to England to learn how to use radar tactically. In other words, we worked most of the time with long-range radar, and we learned from the English. We had English instructors, they taught us, and we were with the RAF [Royal Air Force]. I was not with the American forces the whole time I was in England; I was assigned to the RAF. So I got to know a lot of the RAF pilots, Spitfire pilots, and these guys that have plenty of experience.

It was a wonderful experience, and I was very lucky because I didn't have anybody shooting at me and I didn't have to shoot at anybody else. We were in training the whole time. Then, believe it or not, we got shipped back. I thought I'd never get out of England until the invasion, but before the invasion, we got shipped back to England, we came back on the *Queen Mary*. Went over on the *Queen Mary*. We came back on the *Queen Mary* with [Winston] Churchill, when Churchill came over to visit [Franklin D.] Roosevelt. Do you remember?

Johnson: Yes.

Johnson: Well, we were on board. Came back with Churchill, and then in this country we were assigned down in—by this time, I'd been in the Army Signal Corps, Army Air Force, and then the Air Force when the Air Force became a service division. So I wound up in the Air Force. I was in Air Force, a captain in the Air Force, and came back here and trained troops down in Florida. Then they shipped us over to Texas, Louisiana, then into California, and I was in California. I was superintendent of a night-fighter school, Hammer Field, in California, when I was put on inactive duty.

That's when we got to meet Ralph. When we got put on inactive duty, we came back through Kansas City and met Ralph back to Detroit, you know.

Honhart: When you were in California, you said you were head of a night-fighter division.

Johnson: Yes, Hammer Field in Fresno, Fresno, California.

Honhart: What sort of planes were they flying?

Johnson: Well, the night-fighter plans that we had, we had several kinds. We used—remember the twin-boom, was it P-31s?

Honhart: Or the P-61 Black Widow?

Johnson: We had the Black Widow, of course. That was the night fighter. That was built for night fighting. But for training, we used some of the other planes. We used quite a variety of planes, but the Black Widow was the airplane that was trained for night-fighter duty.

Then we advanced from day operations, intercept operations to night operations, and then we were one of the first units at Hammer Field to get what they called GCA, ground control approach. We were the first ones to teach the pilots ground control, blind flying in fog conditions and stuff like that, see. We had more fun with that than anything else. We got our radars—we got this, we called it temperature inversion. When the temperature at the higher altitude was warmer than the temperature below, a radar beam would go up and bounce off this and come back to earth, and we could paint city streets in towns. There is a little town of Modesto, which is south of Fresno, and if we were painting our radar that way, we head and we'd paint Modesto on our radarscopes, and we'd have the streets lined up on Modesto. Several of us would take time out and we'd go to Modesto, so we knew Modesto, we knew the streets, and we had these pilots flying airplanes for us. The planes that we had for training out there were dive bombers, Navy Marine dive bombers.

Honhart: The Dauntless?

Johnson: And we used those for training, and we'd fly these guys over Modesto, and we'd fly them. "You're now flying up Lincoln Avenue. Turn right at so-and-so street," and we knew all the names of the streets. These guys had been there, too, you know, and they'd fly. We used to have the guys come down to our radar operations van, "How in the hell can you guys tell us what streets to fly up to?" So we told them the secret, that we got this temperature inversion and we

could fly right up the streets and make the left turns and right turns. That was some of the fun we had.

Then we had other times, which I almost got into trouble on. Now, we vectored our planes up. There was a lot of traffic along the California coast between Los Angeles and San Francisco, commercial traffic, and at night these guys would be flying there, and we'd pick up these commercial aircraft on our radar. We'd vector our aircraft onto these guys, and they'd fly right off the wingtips area, and, of course, our aircraft we were flying without any lights on at all, see. They'd fly right in formation with these aircraft, and then I'd say, "Okay, turn the lights on." They'd turn their lights on and the people in the aircraft would have a fit, you know. They'd think they were being invaded or something. We thought it was funny, but it was not funny. They never did find out who was doing it, and we had to cut it out, of course, because we were causing—people were getting scared. The pilots weren't that bothered on the commercial aircraft. They weren't that bothered because they knew what it was. But the people, the passengers, it would scare the hell out of them, see? [laughter]

So that was the things we did out in California, that's why. This was the night-fighter school that I became superintendent of, and I was before I was discharged or put on inactive duty. I had taken my son out to California, and he was with me. So when Charlotte and I called on Ralph and Arnella, we had our son with us.

Honhart: Oh, that was nice.

Johnson: Oh, that was great.

Honhart: When you were in England, when did you go over to England to get the training?

Johnson: July of '42. I was only in the Army a month or two months. I don't know, one or two months. They gave us a commission, of course, in the Signal Corps as a second lieutenant, but then they had to make ninety-day wonders out of us, you know, and we didn't have any status at all. We were just plain G.I.'s, and that was a bitch, a whole month of this stuff, because we weren't in condition for it. Training, up at five-thirty in the morning, you know, and living in a barracks, and we were treated like enlisted men, like G.I.'s before we finally graduated from that school. They did give us a graduation. Then shortly after that, they sent us over to England, and we were there a year and got to come back, and, as I say, we never thought we were going to come back.

Honhart: Where were you stationed in England?

Johnson: All over England. Some of the places I remember the best were a couple of—North Wheel Airdrome [phonetic], just north of London, a couple of airdromes north of London. I remember North Wheel particularly because we had sixty chickens, and at high tea at five o'clock in the afternoon, you know, the English all have high tea, we had high tea. We had hard-boiled eggs, and no one in the whole country had an egg, see, and any kind of dairy products or milk or anything like that. But they had the chickens on this place, must have been a farm or something at one time, and I remember that very distinctly because I lost about thirty pounds while I was over there. I didn't get any dairy products at all. I didn't care for their kippered herring or churned hare, jugged hare. Do you know what that is?

Honhart: No.

Johnson: They let rabbits hang until they get ripe, and they eat them for [unclear]. They call it jugged hare. It's awful. And high pheasant, they let their pheasant hang until it gets ripe.

I'd walk in the officers' mess, the RAF officers, didn't have any American food while I was working. Well, I should say that. I did have. I'd line up a couple of my buddies, Welshmen, who was an RAF officer on our airdrome, and a Norwegian. We had a Norwegian fighter squadron on, which was wonderful, because I'm Norwegian and I got to know these guys real well. I buddied with a couple of them. They were wonderful guys. I'd walk in the officers' mess, there'd be two or three of them standing around talking Norwegian. The minute I walked in the door, they started talking English. I says, "You guys, you don't have to do that." It was part of a courtesy. I said, "Where the hell did you learn to talk English so well?" Second language; they learn it in third grade. I've been a real fan around here of trying to get our schools to teach a foreign language when the kids—because they pick it up so fast, you know. One of my nephews, his dad was a Navy man, in the Navy, got duty down in Venezuela, I think it was. Anyhow, he took a fast course in Spanish. He had four kids. They took their kids with them down there. That's a story in itself. They fly their own Cessna 180. They flew it down to South America, and that's something. But anyhow, their seven-year-old son, my sister used to take him to the store so that he could be her interpreter, because he learned to speak Spanish. Two weeks after he was down there, he was speaking and understanding Spanish. Wonderful. But I'm sorry, I digress. I could talk forever. Don't egg me on. Where were we? We were over in England, yes.

Honhart: England. What were the conditions like there as far as the population?

Johnson: I didn't really—I got stationed there with the RAF during the—what did they call it?

Buzz bomb area. Remember when they had the buzz bombs come over?

Honhart: Yes.

Johnson: So I wasn't there for the real bombings. The buzz bombs were bad enough. So I didn't really get any action. That was before we invaded France in '40.

We were in an evacuation area. Our school was in [unclear], England, which is right on the French coast, and they evacuated ten miles back from the coast. No people were living along the coast that faced France, because they were afraid of a German invasion, of course. So we were in the evacuated area.

One of my RAF buddies that flew Spitfires, he'd been shot down twice, the second time in the channel. They rescued him out of the channel, and he was on R&R and he had to fly. He wanted to fly all the time. So he was flying little DeHavilland Moths. It's a little biplane, fabric wings.

Honhart: Yes, I know what it is.

Johnson: Tandem cockpit. You're familiar with them?

Honhart: Oh, yes.

Johnson: So one day he asked me, he said, “Do you want to go up with me? I’m on duty now calibrating searchlights.” You know, the English had searchlights all over the place, and they were radar-controlled searchlights. But they checked the calibration on them every once in a while. He’d go up to 10,000 feet and fly about the searchlight, and they’d calibrate their instruments on his 10,000 feet so they could use and it would be a little bit more accurate than what they thought.

After I agreed to fly with him, I thought, I’m crazy. I sat in the front cockpit on a parachute, and we took off, went out, did our duty, flew around a couple of searchlights that he calibrated. He said, “How about, do you want to go over France?”

“Oh, France,” I said, “France doesn’t belong to us. That’s Nazi territory.”

“Well,” he said, “Hell, nobody pays any attention to our little DeHavilland, because we fly low. We’ll go about five hundred feet, something like that.”

“Won’t the antiaircraft shoot at us?”

He said, “No, they don’t waste ammunition on us.” The [unclear] and some of those fighter planes, they don’t dare try that shit because they’d dive onto us and they couldn’t pull out of a dive.”

Okay. So we flew over the English Channel and over the French coast, you know, flew into—we didn’t go into Paris, that far, but we flew [unclear] and came back. Nobody paid any attention to us, you know.

Honhart: This at night?

Johnson: No.

Honhart: Oh, during the day?

Johnson: Daytime, yes.

Honhart: Oh, wow.

Johnson: This was the daytime. That's what was concerning me. This guy was a nut, too. I should have—I don't know, you kind of lose perspective, I guess, when you're over there. But I thought it would be exciting.

Honhart: It was.

Johnson: It was exciting all right. When we got back to the airdrome, he doesn't land on the fields, on the runways, or he doesn't land at all, until he gets to the apron in front of the airdrome where they kept his aircraft, and he come flying right above the ground and as soon as he got to the concrete apron, he dropped the plane on it and taxied up to the apron. [laughs] Oh, Christ, I didn't know what the hell he was doing. Well, he didn't want to land and do all that taxiing, so he goes and comes right up there. These guys, I have more respect for those English people, these kids. They were kids. Christ, they were eighteen, nineteen years old, flying these goddamn Spitfires out there.

We'd go out to the airdrome after one of our flights was out on a mission, and we drove out to see them come back because the guys that had gotten one of the German aircraft would do barrel rolls over the airdrome. The biggest thrill I had was when my buddy, I knew which airplane his was, when he came back, he did a barrel roll and he'd shot—he'd gotten two of them. Not at the same time, but I mean two of them.

When I left the airdrome, I was transferred up to Newcastle. While I was at Newcastle, I had tried to keep communication with him. It's hard to communicate. It doesn't [unclear]. You can't tell about where you are or anything, you know. I'd found out that he'd been shot down, and he was in the field hospital someplace and was in pretty rough shape. But he made it. I found out he had made it, and I found out later that the nurse, the English nurse that had taken care of him, he married her. Then I lost track of him. Oh, he's a great kid. Djoniy was his name, D-j-o-n-i-y, or something like that, real wonderful kid. He trained Norway. He's a Norwegian pilot. He trained over in Canada, and then they couldn't get back to Norway because Norway was then occupied.

So the Norwegians made up a squadron over in Canada and came back to the England and joined the English forces, the RAF. They all became RAF pilots here. Several other, I can't even remember some of them, but Newcastle is the one I remembered very well, because we as American officers, some of the BLQs were filled with RAF officers, so they'd farm us out to the English families. Some of the families had extra bedrooms, and they would make them available to the RAF, and I got farmed out in Newcastle to a family, and their name was Newcastle, and they had a son and a daughter. Their son was in the Army over in India at the time, and their daughter worked someplace, I don't know, and I had their son's bedroom. God, those people treated me just like their son.

Anytime anybody says anything about the English, I get very upset, because I think they're the most wonderful people in the world. She treated—she'd have a hot brick in my bed at night, because, you know, we didn't have any heat, no heating and that sort of stuff. She'd have this hot brick in my bed at night to warm up the bed.

In the morning, she'd wake me up with a cup of tea. Well, I don't care for tea, particularly with that damn cream in it, and the cream was that [unclear] stuff, you know what it was, it was fake cream. I told her one morning, I said, "You know, ma'am, I don't really care for this stuff."

"Oh, would you like some bovil [phonetic]?"

I said, "Bovil? What's bovil?" Do you know what bovil is? It's very much like our poston [phonetic]. It's kind of like a beef broth, you know, sort of. I said, "Yes." I didn't know what it was, but I said it's better than tea. So she'd wake me up every morning with a hot cup of this bovil, and it was delicious.

I had the worst time with Mr. Newcastle. He worked for Vickers, which is a big ammunition and the war [unclear].

Honhart: Right, armaments.

Johnson: Made armaments and stuff for them in England. He was a mechanical engineer, and he found out I'd been an electrical engineer. Well, jeez, I'd come home from my eight hours' operations, in the operations room, and try to sneak up to bed because I was tired, and he'd nail me every time, and we'd be up half the night talking. He just loved to talk to an engineer, too,

see, that was the point. He just loved it, and American. Real wonderful people, but I'd be so tired and I'd try to sneak in, but he'd always catch me. [laughter]

And the best part of it was, I said when I leave—I couldn't tell my wife where I was any time, you know, and when I left Newcastle and got transferred someplace else, I asked Mrs. Newcastle if she would drop a note to my wife and tell me I'd been there and all that stuff, see, because she could do that. My wife was so excited when she got this note from her telling her that I'd lived there and that I was fine and all that kind of stuff. We kept a little correspondence up going for about a year or so, but then you really don't have anything in common, it's very difficult to keep up a conversation or a correspondence like that, see.

Well, I could go on and on. I'd better knock it off here.

Honhart: That's great, actually. That's really interesting.

Johnson: Yes, but we're not talking about Ralph. We're talking about me.

Honhart: Yes, but that's okay. That's fine. That's fine. It gives an insight. Besides, it's an interesting story.

Johnson: We had different lives, Ralph and I. Ralph was so much smarter than I was, but the two of us got along very well together and we appreciated each other, I guess, and our girls were the same way. My wife was a graduate from Michigan, University of Michigan, in English. She got her B.A. in English and worked for Michigan Bell as a—what the hell was the name of that? She was a—when you had difficulty with your telephone, you called Michigan Bell and you got

these gals. They had eight or ten of them, and they would talk to you and try to talk you out of it. If you had a real tough nut, they had to call their supervisor and let him talk to them. That's the kind of work she was doing when I married her. But then we got transferred to Saginaw. I opened an office in Saginaw for Westinghouse, and so she didn't work after that.

But I never could understand how I got along with Ralph. I mean, Ralph and Halley and Arnella were all topnotch students in school, and I never was. I had to work my butt off to get through college, one of the reasons why I never had real time to date in college, because I was working. So when I got out of college, then my object was to get a job. When I got the job, now I started looking at the girls and decided maybe I should try and see if I could find a wife.

Ask me something else, though.

Honhart: One of the things Ralph did so much was travel. Did you have any indication when you were young that he would be interested in traveling like the way he did?

Johnson: No, no. He and I were basically interested in chemistry, because of him. I was interested a little bit but not that much. I was more interested in the mechanical things and electrical. I can't remember that he showed any interest for traveling. But, of course, he got a Rhodes scholarship and was sent over to Taiwan, wasn't it? I think he went to Taiwan.

Honhart: Yes, yes, he and Arnella.

Johnson: He went to Taiwan to set up a police administration school over there. Of course, I'd lost contact with him then at that time, but I reestablished contact when he got back, and he'd

been over there twice. I think he was into China, too, at one time. But he spent most of the time in Taiwan, setting up this police administration school in Taiwan.

Then they came back. They had their kids with them, of course, Arnella and their kids, and they came back through Europe, which was a real treat for the kids, and for Arnella, too, and Ralph. So they got to see a lot of Europe. They came back through Europe when they had to leave Taiwan because when they set up the machine gun in his front yard, he decided he better get out.

Honhart: It was South Vietnam. He wasn't in Taiwan then.

Johnson: Oh, he wasn't, yes, that's right. He was Vietnam. That's the other place they went, yes. I don't know too much about that, except I know he was over there. That's right.

Honhart: Yes. He took the whole family for a year, he said.

Johnson: Yes, he took the whole family with him. He always took his family with him, and, of course, Georgia was very fluent in Chinese. In fact, I think she taught Chinese in some college in Washington, D.C., didn't she?

Honhart: I think she could have. I don't know.

Johnson: I don't know, but she was a very talented gal and she learned to speak Chinese, which is not easy.

Honhart: No.

Johnson: Yes, he had smart kids, too.

Honhart: Yes, they did. They do.

Johnson: If I had stayed with Arnella, we wouldn't have had such smart kids as they had.

[laughs] My kids, they're all right, though. One's vice president of a big advertising concern over here in Fairling [phonetic], Young and Rubicon. My other gal is the second in charge of the—they have what they call a neighborhood club in Grosse Point, and they handle all sports and all activities of kids. She graduated from Western Michigan here in Michigan with a degree in physical education and a degree in—what's the other thing? Recreation, I guess, or something. She always wanted to work with kids, and this outfit was over in Grosse Point. We lived in Grosse Point, and she worked in the summertime as an intern, you know, and that sort of stuff. So when she got out of college, they hired her right away on an intern basis for a year. At the end of the year, I got to talk to her boss. They said they couldn't understand how they ever got along without her, so there wasn't any question about it, and she's been with them for forty years, something like that, and she's second in charge. They have a director, John Norris [phonetic], hell of a nice guy. I sent a donation to them. It's an outfit that does not want to get affiliated with United Way or any of that crap because they don't want the government telling them how to run it, so they're self-running. They charge fees for all their sports. They had all kinds of sports, any sports there.

One year she had 650 girls in softball and she was trying to set up teams, you know, and that sort. It's a very active club. John was the head at the time, and he had one lady that was head of recreation working for him. That was the only paid. Now they've got eleven paid people over there running the very different sports and dancing and everything, and all of these activities come under my daughter, so she has a good job over there. They call her recreation director, and she's second to the boss.

My son, he was with Westinghouse. I shouldn't be telling this.

Honhart: No, that's okay, please finish up.

Johnson: He's with Westinghouse, and Westinghouse sold out. Boy, I'll never forget neither when he called me and told me he was out of a job after being with them for twenty-seven years. Then he worked contracting, you know, through a contractor. His contractor would get the work for him, and he worked for Disneyland and he was down in Florida by that time. Westinghouse had sent him down to Orlando because they had a big engineering operation down there. By this time, he's up to his ears in computers. He's doing—what the hell was his title? Project engineer. He set up the computer for all the projects and that kind of stuff. He worked for Disneyland, which was quite an experience, and he worked for the city of Orlando. He told me some experiences of how working for a city operation. He said—talk about politics. He said, “My god, I'm not a politician and I had a tough time.” So he didn't work there too long and then he had someplace else. Then he got back, he was working with some outfit. I can't remember what it was.

[Begin Tape 2, Side A]

Johnson: So it's worked out beautifully.

Honhart: That's great. That's great.

Johnson: He's sixty-two years old. God, I can't believe I've got a son sixty-two years old, and two daughters, one is sixty and the other is fifty-seven or something like that. I've been around too damn long.

Honhart: Oh, I don't think that.

Give you a chance, any last thoughts about your relationship with Ralph, things you did together or anything?

Johnson: Yes, yes.

Honhart: Do you have any last thoughts?

Johnson: No, excepting that he was my best buddy, and, as I told you on our way up here, one of my—put me in the hospital. I got a call from Georgia that Ralph had died on a Sunday afternoon, and that was bad enough, but then it was only about two hours later I got a call from my sister-in-law that I had lost my brother. Two within a couple of hours was more than my emotional system could handle, I guess, and, I don't know, I just completely lost it, I guess. I

don't know. I wound up in the hospital. They couldn't find a damn thing wrong with me, and they thought at first that I had some kind of a problem in my stomach, an ulcer or something. There was nothing there. The only thing they finally decided—I told them about this, of course, was decided that it was such an emotional shock to lose my best friend and my brother within two hours that it just knocked my emotional system all to hell.

Honhart: Was this an older or younger brother?

Johnson: My brother was ten years younger than I am. He was one of those that came along as a surprise, you know, great kid, great kid. He went in the Army.

My mother was a concert pianist that taught music, piano, and after she got married, her kids were the three of us. My sister, my brother and I, had to learn to play an instrument. She didn't care which instrument, but she wanted us to play. She really made a mistake. She should have taught us piano first. You should first learn to play piano before you take up an instrument.

Honhart: Yes, I agree.

Johnson: Because now when I try to read music, I have a terrible time reading music. Music score is two fingers down, first and third finger down, on the trumpet. I learned to play a trumpet, and I learned my music on a trumpet. It wasn't A, B, D, C and so on. It was two fingers down, first and third. [laughs]

I organized a choir here. Our choir director was [unclear] system here for about three years, great guy, wonderful director, and I told him. He wants me to sing. Tenor is my, although

it's dropped down considerable. He's got me singing bass baritone now. I said, "I'm too weak on reading. I can't read the damn music."

"Oh," he said, "you're a trumpet player, aren't you?" [laughs]

I said, "Yes, that's right." And he realized that.

But how did I digress? What were we talking about? Oh, man, how Ralph was absolutely my best friend for the longest time. I made lots of friends in school, made lots of friends when I was a sales engineer, first, before I became manager of industrial division over here, and I made lots of friends there. But Ralph was always my best friend.

Honhart: Thank you very much.

Johnson: And my brother, too. [laughs]

Honhart: Yes. Thank you very much for the time. I appreciate it.

Johnson: Fred, I hope I didn't bore you.

Honhart: Oh, never.

[End of interview]

Index

_____, Georgia, 18, 35
_____, John, 18

Johnson, Mrs. Richard, 33

Matthews, Roy, 6
Michigan State University, 7

Turner, Arnella, 4, 5, 7, 10, 15, 16, 19, 25, 34, 35, 36

Turner, Mrs. Richard Johnson, 7

Turner, Ralph, 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 19, 23, 25, 33, 34, 35, 38, 40

Wolf, Halley, 5, 19, 34