



1st Lieutenant William Henry Johnson
USAAF 8th Air Force, 447th Bomb Group, 311th Squadron
Royal Air Force Station Rattlesden

Thank you for honoring the service, the decisions, and the actions of a young man, a twenty-three year old man, who was known as Bill in his hometown: Minneapolis, Minnesota.

On this very day, 13 April, seventy-five years ago, 1st Lieutenant William Henry Johnson fulfilled his military responsibilities as an American pilot - a contributing force of the Allies' determination for victory and of freedom and made a valorous decision that defined his character - who he was as a man. His courage, empathy, capacity to rise above self for others was a testament of a bright hurricane lamp in a time of darkness.

His story became his legacy offering a blueprint to live an honorable and significant life, and to nurture characteristics of leadership that inspires others. He was loved and cherished by those who knew him in all the separate spheres he lived in: as a son, as a brother, as a friend, as an officer, and as a beloved leader. He was an inspiring leader who called out the best in his crew, and, in turn, they called out his best - a true brother-in-arms.

1st Lieutenant William Henry Johnson lived his life in the honorable family path of those who preceded him, and his life, cut short by his heroic decisions and actions, has been and will forever be a guide of leadership, honor, and character for those in the present and future. He was a Johnson – a ubiquitous last name! Yet, his Johnson template was one of courage, compassion, integrity, the proven capacity to take action and step up for what is right, to be a maverick, to think and act in kindness, and function as an inspiring leader.

I never met 1st Lieutenant William Henry Johnson. I knew him as 'Uncle Bill', the beloved brother of my Father, Richard Harold Johnson. My sister, two brothers and I grew up watching the 16 mm movies of Uncle Bill's – silent moving pictures of life on base and in battle. I was born nine years and nine months after 1st Lieutenant William Henry Johnson made his fateful decisions which ensured the safety of his crew and spared the lives of a family who lived in the farmhouse his enflamed B17 plane would destroy if he bailed out. He chose to divert and go down with his plane.

Uncle Bill's character was my unseen North Star throughout my life – shaping my responses to difficult challenges and selecting the 'threshold' decisions composing my life story – another Johnson story.

I regret I am not with you all on this luminous occasion and special milestone in our world story. I am happy that my beloved nephews, George and Max, are the representatives of the Johnson life force on this very date honoring a forever-young man named Bill - a true hero.

I am so grateful, appreciate, and awed by the dedicated research of Priscilla Goldfarb. Thank you.

Catherine Louise Johnson – a niece of 1st Lieutenant William Henry Johnson

Dear Dick:

I know how difficult you must have found it to take the sad news but know that you will keep your head up and be proud of Bill, as he was of you. Your brother deserved your high esteem and proved it in the way that he carried out his last mission.

Bill only had five more missions before his planned vacation home but ran into trouble on this one. Bill is buried in "Brookwood" military cemetery in England and his crew members and myself acted as the escorts for the ceremony. It was a very touching affair with the guard of honor firing the salute and planes flying over the grave barely clearing the trees.

Bill brought his plane back to this shore on one motor and gave the crew all a chance to bail out before crashing himself with the plane. He covered himself with glory by this act and did as he had always promised "to take care of his men". Bill was due for his Captaincy the next day and is certainly due for additional honors by his action. Bill had the respect and confidence of all the crew and his fellow officers. They all feel this very deeply. His C.O., Col. Harris, was a close personal friend of Bill's and had nothing but praise for his actions and record.

He was a good soldier and officer and was adored by his crew members. He did as he always had promised. He took good care of the men under him up to the very last flight and saved all of them. Like the good captain that he was, he stayed with the ship until the last.

Bill was a fine man, a good soldier, a marvelous officer, and best of all - a real brother to you.

Harold

The letter above was written by a Johnson cousin, Harold Kulp, who served in WW II, to my Father, Richard (Dick) Harold Johnson. Bill was killed on 13 April 1944, and my Father would turn 16 years old on 15 April 1944. Harold and his sister Bette lived with Albert A. and Florence Johnson and their cousins: Bob (WW II veteran, Navy pilot, Pacific Theatre), Bill, Dick and Florence in Minneapolis. Bill's character was echoed in my Father's life.



Above: the Washburn High School graduation picture of Richard (Dick) Harold Johnson.