

WWII vet endured life of shell shock

When Bill Johnson returned from World War II, his family immediately knew there was something different about him.

In letters his mother wrote to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, she spoke of his restlessness, inability to hold a conversation, difficulty making friends, and new behavioral ticks.

LIFE STORIES

BY ELIZABETH SHESTAK

"If you could know this boy now and before he went in the

service, you couldn't believe it was the same boy. It is hard on me to watch him every day with no improvement. I have hoped so hard," she wrote.

She wrote this in 1950, nearly five years after he was honorably discharged from the U.S. Army after serving a tour in Italy. His family, namely his mother, spent decades petitioning the U.S. Army to acknowledge the changes in Johnson and claim them as service-related. It seemed simple to them - he was one way before entering the army, and another afterwards, going from "normal" to debilitated and dependent.

And yet his mental injuries were deemed 30 percent "non-service related," and Johnson



Bill Johnson, far left, gathers in 2010 with his surviving brothers and sister. His mother tried to obtain Veterans Administration help for him as early as 1950.

COURTESY OF THE JOHNSON FAMILY

WILLIAM HUBERT JOHNSON

Born: Dec. 8, 1922.

1943: Drafted by the U.S. Armed Forces.

1946: Honorably discharged from the U.S. Armed Forces.

1963: His mother dies.

Died: Dec. 4, 2011.

was never compensated.

He was fortunate to come from a tight-knit family, living in his family home with his parents until their death, and then, following a shoulder surgery a few years ago, with one of his brothers, Sam Johnson, and his wife, Wiloree.

His family made sure he had a

personal savings account, that his bills were paid and that he got to the doctor when it was necessary, though for years and years he had an irrational fear of seeing physicians.

"He was happy" despite his condition, said his niece, Sharon Johnson O'Donnell. "He was taken well care of."

Last month, just four days before he died of a brain hemorrhage at the age of 88, Johnson had signed off on his family resuming efforts to have his condition deemed service-related.

Johnson never married and would coyly point to the television when asked whether he had a date. He watched a lot of television.

His numerous nieces and nephews never knew who he was before going off to war, but to them he was Uncle Bill, a man who would bring them a cold drink on a hot summer day, a man who had a way with animals and who couldn't bear to hurt a living thing, opting to escort bugs outside rather than smooch them dead.

He was one of 12 children born in Pitt County, but he was mainly brought up in Raleigh. His father opened Archie Johnson & Sons Sewing Machine Repair and Sales in 1910 and moved the shop to Lake Wheeler Road in the 1950s. The family grew up in a house next door to the shop.

This proved convenient for Johnson's family - he was capable of opening the shop and doing basic repairs, but it was mainly a place for him to go

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each day.

He was a fixture, and that last few years of his life he mainly watched television. He mumbled and was not comfortable chatting, but folks had a fondness for him, his family said, particularly people who had been in the neighborhood a long time.

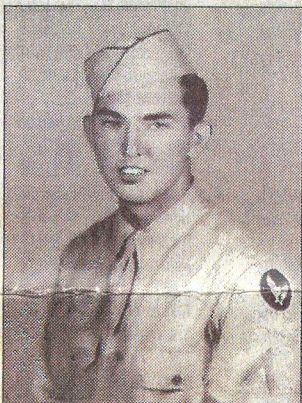
Johnson's brother, Sam Johnson Sr., 87, remembers a brother who was mischievous, lively and capable of pulling pranks before the war. He had enough smarts to earn a certificate for sheet metal training in Baltimore, and he had friends – something he was unable to enjoy after the war.

"He was a nice fella, quiet, easygoing, very humble and appreciative of the things we did for him," his brother said.

Wrestling with the VA

Johnson's mother was the main crusader in his cause until her death in 1963. By then his family had come to accept Bill's new condition, and it was not until Johnson was in his 60s that the children of his brother Sam, who had taken over the sewing machine shop, thought to investigate further.

They were driven both out of concern for the financial logistics associated with taking care of Uncle Bill, a job they



Bill Johnson served in Italy during World War II.

COURTESY OF THE JOHNSON FAMILY

knew would be theirs should he outlive their parents, as well as a sense of injustice.

"We would get upset about it and think, 'This is so unfair,'" O'Donnell said.

Her sister, Mary Johnson Brown, still works in the shop with her parents, and she spent a lot of time with Uncle Bill. She penned numerous letters to the VA in the 1980s, and his family was eventually able to unearth a number of documents showing the various exchanges his family had had with the VA.

He was at one point diagnosed as "schizophrenic reaction, paranoid type – predisposition is unknown and precipitating stress is unknown," and his injuries were thought to be 30 percent non-service related. There remains confusion as to why he never received the appropriate compensation

for the remaining 70 percent, even though numerous physicians over the years documented his condition as post-traumatic stress disorder.

He was initially thought to simply have shell shock.

"Back then if you didn't come back with arms or legs blown off – they didn't treat mental issues like they do now," Brown said.

In his obituary, his family wrote, "He didn't lose his life in the war, but he was a casualty."

New view of Uncle Bill

His nephew, Sam Johnson Jr., said his uncle was "ego-less."

Even though he was never able to participate in their lives in a more engaging way, his family, even those who never knew his pre-war personality, appreciated him.

"We all loved Uncle Bill," O'Donnell said.

She was with him in the hospital following the hemorrhage, and the last thing she told him was that she was sorry she was unable to include him in her life the way she wanted.

"I feel terrible that I was ever embarrassed of him," she said, remembering what it was like when friends saw him in the sewing shop and stared. "Now I feel proud, and I feel honored that he was my uncle."