

Stories of Scheherazade

Rachelle Blair Managing Editor | Posted: Wednesday, August 5, 2015 3:30 pm

Seventy years after World War II, Kenneth Johnson still marvels at how his B-17 “Scheherazade” survived more than 100 missions during the war.

“That’s something I never figured out, how come that B-17 of mine would come back,” he says from his home in Dane. “I figure there as somebody who had more power than anybody else looking out for it... 14 pilots did missions in that airplane, it’s crazy.”

Life at war

Johnson was 26 years old when he enlisted in the United States Air Force after the attack on Pearl Harbor. The event threw the United States into WWII and Johnson volunteered for service to prevent his two brothers from going over seas. His older brother was taking care of the family farm in Dane and his younger brother had medical concerns. His family was grateful, he says.

“My brothers gave me anything I wanted,” Johnson says with a laugh, remembering their reaction when he first enlisted.

Before going overseas to England and the war, Johnson and his now wife of 72 years, Eleanor, had been together for a few years. While stationed in Nebraska, before being shipped off, Johnson learned he had a five-day furlough.

“So I called her up and told her I had a furlough coming up, should we get married, and she said ‘why not’,” Johnson says.

“I had to find a church, a pastor, a place for the reception, get a band,” Eleanor says. “I had five days but we made it.”

The couple was married for three months before Johnson went to war. The newlyweds stayed in contact with each other through letters. She would tell him about the farm and family, and he would talk about his experiences.

“We wrote letters every day, even though it would take three weeks for them to get to each other,” she says.



Kenneth Johnson

World War II veteran Kenneth Johnson was crew chief of B-17 “Scheherazade” which made 126 combat missions. Johnson still has the plane’s clock as a memento.

In one letter, Eleanor told Johnson that his cousin, Bob Esser, was in an England hospital after being injured as an infantry soldier.

“She wrote a letter to me, told me where he was and I had a pilot take me over there,” Johnson says. “When he got a little better he came to visit me and we took him up in the B-17, even let him sit in the co-pilot seat.”

In the Air Force, Johnson attended mechanic school where he earned specialties in prop, engine, and general airplane. Eventually he was assigned to the 447th Bomb Group and sent overseas to England, where he served as crew chief for B-17 No. 42-31225, a bomber lovingly called “Scheherazade” by Johnson and the rest of the crew.

Johnson remembers the six-day voyage on the Queen Elizabeth, which carried 2,000 U.S. soldiers to England.

“All the ground crew was on that ship,” he says. “We’d never been overseas before, you didn’t know if you were going to make it back or not.”

That nervousness extended to the young pilots. Johnson’s group was the first to fly the B-17 G, which had turret guns in the nose section.

“You can imagine what those young kids were thinking, a lot of those pilots were high school graduates,” he says. “They figured the next day was probably going to be the last day they’d be alive.”

As crew chief, Master Sergeant Johnson was tasked with keeping “Scheherazade” in the air, and that’s just what he did.

The plane is credited with flying 126 missions without a single mechanical abort, the second highest in the 447th, second only to “Milk Wagon” which had 129 missions. He estimates the crew went through 30 engines, each with more than 100 hours clocked, before taking the plane on its final flight home to the United States.

Even though crew chiefs weren’t allowed to go into combat, Johnson was no stranger to the trials of war. After enlisting, he was shipped off to training during the cold of winter in Missouri. Armed with an overcoat and two blankets, Johnson says the recruits fought the cold sleeping in tents.

“They had little stoves in there, but we didn’t know how to fire them,” he says. “There was a fellow who froze to death in there... When I went into the service, the government was just like a little kid, they didn’t know what they were doing.”

Johnson recalls one night while based in England, where he’d been for six to nine months; German planes flew over the base and dropped bombs on the officers’ quarters and mess hall.

“Flak went through the canvas on the tent,” Johnson says. “I was asleep at the time. That’s the

closest I ever got to getting hit.”

Johnson says the bomber was shot down and, miraculously, no one on base was injured.

Life after war

After serving four years in the Air Force, the war was over and Johnson was discharged. Using the skills that kept “Scheherazade” in the air, Johnson went to work as a mechanic in Madison.

Shortly after, he got a job with Raemisch Implement where he worked for 50 years until retirement. During that time, Johnson, Eleanor and their children ran their Dane cattle farm. The couple now has five children, seven grandchildren and four great-grandchildren.

Johnson, who will celebrate his 100th birthday on Tuesday, Aug. 11, reveals his secret to a long, happy life, with a smile.

“I’ve been busy most of my life,” he says. “You have to keep moving.”