World War II Casualties

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Donald Wayne Johnson

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Nebraskan, nation's youngest four-engine pilot, dies in crash
near Davis Monthan Field

Lt. Donald Wayne Johnson, son of Mr. and Mrs. Earl Johnson, was born April 19, 1919, at Dunning, Nebraska. He was an honor graduate of the Dunning High School in the Class of 1936, and later entered the Nebraska State Teachers College at Kearney and was classified as a Senior at the time of his enlistment into the U. S. Army Air Corps, early in 1940. Lt. Johnson took a great interest in college activities, being a member of the Phi Tau Gamma Fraternity, Inter-Fraternity Council, K Club, and a member of the Kearney State Teachers College basketball team for four years. He last competed in college basketball on December 19, 1939 when his 21 points gave Kearney State a 42-39 victory over Midland College.

Don received his primary aviation flight training at Lincoln, Nebraska, graduated from Randolph Field in July, 1940, and was commissioned a 2nd Lt. in the U. S. Army Air Corps, October 4, 1940 at Kelly Field, Texas.

After receiving his commission, he was assigned to active duty at Douglas Field, Salt Lake City, Utah, where he was a member of the 33rd Reconnaissance Squadron. In 1942 he was sent to Great Britain as a military observer and served in the capacity of instructor of the R.A.F. on the American built flying fortress, the B-17. While in England, he was made first pilot on the B-17 and at that time he was the youngest four-engine pilot in the U.S. Army Air Corps, and was considered one of Nebraska's most famous young fliers.

During the time Lt. Johnson was in England, he and Lt. Gibson, who was also sent to England for the same purpose, recommended to the U.S. Army Air Corps, that bullet proof glass and turrets be installed on the B-17 for the protection of the gunners. This request was granted, and has been Lt. Johnson's gift to the Army Air Corps.
Lt. Johnson received orders to return to the U.S. and was then ordered to Africa just before war broke on December 7th, his orders were changed and he was sent to Salt Lake City, Utah and later transferred to Geiger Field, Spokane, Washington where he joined the 12th reconnaissance squadron as an instructor.

On February 1, 1942, Lt. Johnson was promoted to the rank of 1st Lt. and transferred to Davis Monthan Field, at Tucson, Arizona.

While on a routine flight April 6, 1942, near Tucson, the flying fortress which Don was piloting with a crew of seven men, developed motor trouble causing a fire in one of the motors. Lt. Johnson gave his crew orders to jump, two of the crew members did get out and parachute to safety, but as the third member jumped, his parachute caught in the doorway in such a manner that it trapped the rest of them inside.

An investigation after the crash suggested that it may have been possible for Lt. Johnson to have parachuted to safety, but because of the fact that there were still crew members in the ship that were unable to get out, he must have felt it best to get them down safely if at all possible, but unfortunately as the big bomber was within a few hundred feet of the ground it went out of control and crashed, killing all five members left on board.