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emembering 1945's victory bells  
 A WWII veteran's journey  
 there and back

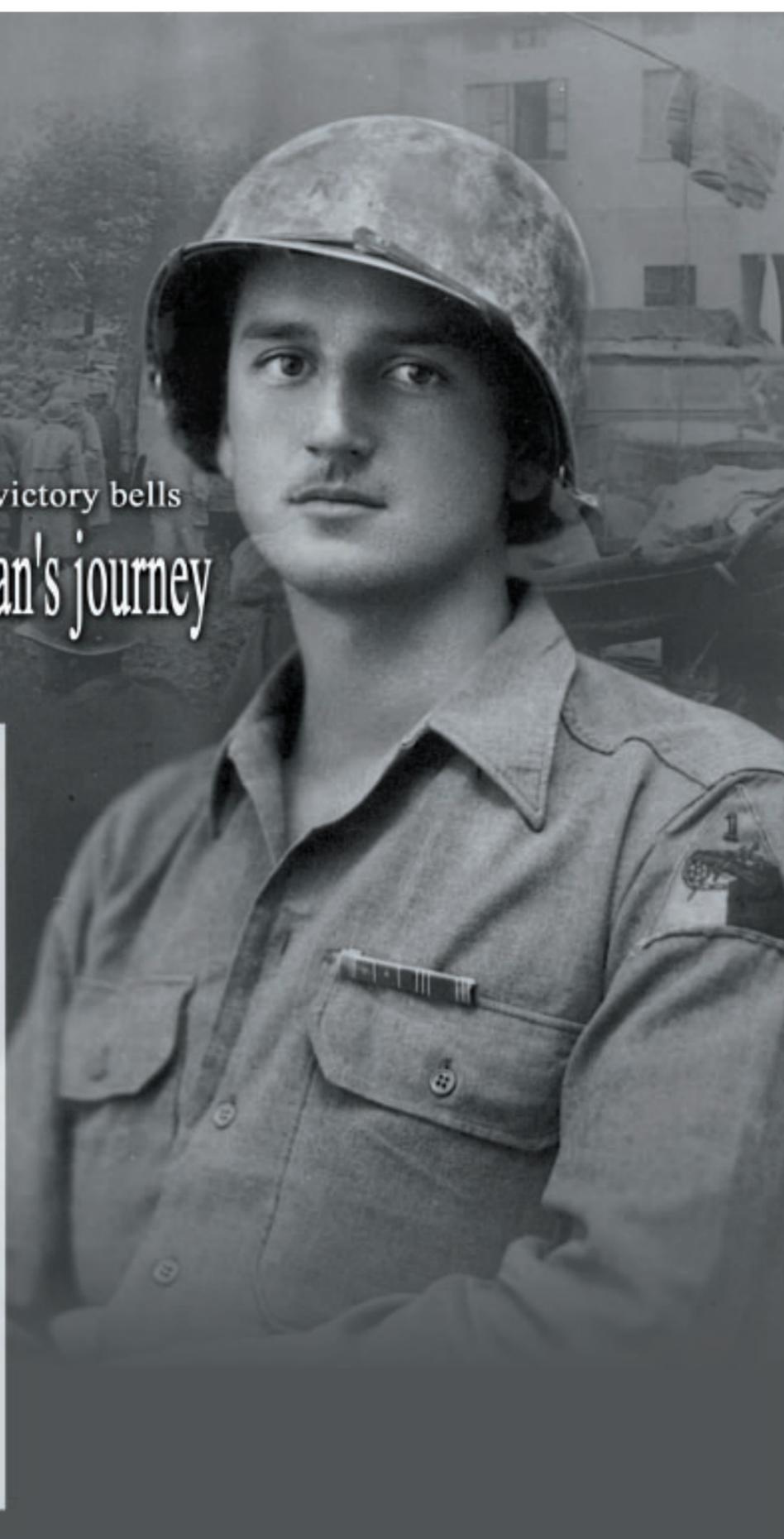
Story by Sgt. Gregory F. Withrow  
 1st Armored Division PAO  
 Photos courtesy Robert M. Johnson

Robert M. Johnson gets a far away look in his eye when he travels back in time to the early 1940s and WWII. He is much older now but the years seem to fade away when he remembers.

He was born July 26, 1924 in King of Prussia, Pa., but please don't tell anyone.

Like many young men at that time, he told a fib about his age to enlist in the U.S. Army at the age of 17. He smiles and doesn't seem to worry about it anymore because he saw the chaplain at Fort Knox, Ky., and had the whole thing cleared up.

The old pictures of Johnson show a young kid, not some crusty, old tanker. He was certainly young then, like many of the other soldiers. He was just a little older than the 1st Armored Division, which was activated July 15, 1940.



Johnson enlisted in May 1942 and received armored crewman training at Fort Knox.

"I was having a ball during training – driving tanks all over the damned place," remembers Johnson. "But those 13 or 14 weeks of training didn't last long, and soon after that I received orders taking me from the 8th Armored Division to the 1st Armored Division."

Johnson soon moved to a deployment staging area in New Brunswick, N.J. to sail to North Africa.

"We sailed on the S.S. Christobel which had been used as a banana boat between New York and South America, but had been refitted to support the war effort," explained Johnson. The ship sailed on Jan. 13, 1943, taking Johnson on a journey he would never forget.

"We landed in North Africa outside Oran. I called it the Repo Depot (replacement depot) and it was a mess – all kinds of equipment everywhere," said Johnson. He was a long way from home, but he was not alone.

Johnson reported to his unit, Company D, 1st Battalion, 13th Armored Regiment, 1st Armored Division.

"'Hey Johnson! When the hell did you get here?' is one of the first things I heard," explained Johnson. "I turned and saw my friend Becker, from back at Knox." A familiar face set Johnson a little more at ease, but it would not be long before Johnson would form other fast friendships.

"That's the thing about a tank outfit, you get close because everyone is vulnerable. When we were in the Po Valley in Italy, Burshad, a Jew, and Hamlin, a Catholic, both got killed. Shells don't distinguish between people," explained Johnson. "We were all out there – a long way from home – but all together."

Johnson soon saw combat in North Africa.

"I was originally an M3 medium tank driver which was 18 tons under feet," reflected Johnson. "We soon had the M5 and M5A1 Stuarts as the Brits called them. We called them s\_\_\_ boxes because half the time they scared the s\_\_\_ out of us," Johnson said with a big

grin. Johnson can recount his war experiences with lightheartedness that belies the grim sights he witnessed and the hard lessons learned by the newborn 1st Armored Division.

"In the Battle of Mousetrapp we had five mediums with a forward observer and nine light tanks knocked out by an 88mm cannon. That was something to see. I tried to go around. I went left and got stuck in a swamp and threw track," explained Johnson.

"But 1st Lieutenant Downs got us through it. He was an ace. He was a real man. We got that 88mm cannon knocked out, but that was a terrible loss," said Johnson.

Johnson can tell many stories and verify obscure details of the war in North Africa with a clarity that makes one think he was there just yesterday, but his experiences weren't limited to 1st Armored Division's first desert conflict.

The good, the bad and the ugly of North Africa soon moved into Italy after the completion of Operation Torch. For Johnson, the war had even taken a turn for the better in some instances.

"While we were just outside Naples we got a barn and had a party with the local [ladies]," explained Johnson smiling all the while.

"Our company bugler was John V. Kelly. He had made bomb racks before he was in the army," explained Johnson. "One day, we found a lost string of bombs. I said, 'This must have been one you made Kelly.' Everyone got a laugh out of that." That moment and many others like it formed a long-lasting friendship between Kelly and Johnson.

"I told Kelly I was going to dance at his wedding. Well, I surprised him at his wedding and



Robert M. Johnson's peaceful rest would soon be over as he was awakened to the news of his promotion to sergeant just before moving into Italy's Po Valley.