

Into the Jet Age

Johnson Led Transition from Piston Engine Aircraft

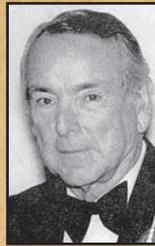
Retired Col. Robert “Marsh” Johnson served as one of the early commanders of the N.D. Air National Guard, overseeing flying operations. He, Retired Brig. Gen. Homer Goebel and a handful of other men were chosen to establish the first-of-its-kind unit in Fargo, N.D., in the late 1940s.

Unfortunately, Johnson, 90, passed away in May 2012 before the North Dakota Guardian was able to complete an interview with him for the First Commanders Series. Nevertheless, his story warrants sharing.

In 1943, Johnson enlisted in the U.S. Army Air Corps as a fighter pilot, but returned to Fargo after his discharge in 1945 with his new wife, Elaine. Within two years, his assistance was requested to launch the new Air National Guard unit there, and Johnson began working full-time as a technician.

“Marsh Johnson was a high school buddy of Homer’s” and they hunted together during college, says Millie Goebel, Homer’s wife.

In 1951, when the Happy Hooligans activated for the Korean War, Johnson flew 60 combat missions against the North Koreans and Chinese. Late the



Courtesy Photo

Lt. Col. Robert “Marsh” Johnson (left) promotes Capt. Billie as Col. Homer Goebel shakes his hand. Johnson was among the men hand-selected by N.D. Adjutant General Heber L. Edwards to start the N.D. Air National Guard in January 1947.

“He never missed an opportunity to soar into the wild blue yonder.”

– Retired Col. Robert “Marsh” Johnson’s obituary

next year, he returned to Fargo and helped reorganize the Air Guardsmen. He served as both a squadron and group commander and, according to the Happy Hooligans’ 30th Anniversary (1947-77) book, “guided his units through their most challenging transition period, the step from piston engine to jet aircraft. After assignment to the position of Chief of Staff for Air, Col. Johnson rounded out his careers as the administrative assistant to the adjutant general.” He retired in 1974.

According to Johnson’s family, music provided his first love in life, and he played various instruments from junior high on. His second love was aviation, and his third, his wife of 60 years, who died in 2005.

“He never missed an opportunity to soar into the wild blue yonder,” Johnson’s obituary reads.

Retired Col. Robert
“Marsh” Johnson



Dec. 6, 1921,
to May 5, 2012

Col. Robert “Marsh” Johnson was one of several men hand-selected by Maj. Gen. Heber L. Edwards, N.D. adjutant general, to start the N.D. Air National Guard in January 1947. He oversaw the Wing’s flying missions and later led the transition from piston engines to jets.



FIRST COMMANDERS SERIES – PART I BONUS STORY

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