

A Proud Wolfe Islander from Button Bay

Written by [Brian Johnson](#) posted on October 13, 2013 07:39

Paul V. Johnson

October 15, 1940 – October 8, 2011

Ambitious, meticulous, redheaded Irishman... could be hotheaded, too!

Margaret (Johnson) Commercial

The late Paul Vincent Johnson's love of Wolfe Island led him homeward later in his life. Growing up on Button Bay on the south shore of the Island, the second son of Vincent and Edna Johnson, Paul with his older brother Jim and younger sister Margaret enjoyed a rural life as children of a hardworking farm couple. One day in late September, 1951, everything changed.



“Our Dad was killed in a farming accident with a threshing machine,” recalled Margaret recently. “Within the week, our family left the farm and went to live with our uncle, Msgr. James S. Ryan at the rectory on the Island.” A late day at harvest time found the Johnson brothers Johnny, Howard and Vinny working long into the twilight hours out at the Todd farm at the head of the Island. Vinny, the mechanic of the bunch, owned the threshing machine and the brothers were helping their brother in law Ralph Taggart with his threshing chores. Johnny was running the tractor powering the belts for the machine while Howard and Ralph worked at the other end, feeding the machine.



Suddenly, an inside belt had slipped. Vinny tapped it into place with his left elbow as he had done countless times before. But in the fading daylight, maybe tired, somehow his left arm carried up where the belt met the pulley. As a result, his arm was instantly severed just below the elbow. After a frantic rush to Kingston in Mullin's motorboat *Rebola*, Vinny Johnson died shortly after in Hotel Dieu Hospital.

“We got the news out at our farm on Button Bay,” said older brother Jim Johnson. “Uncle Jim (parish priest Father J.S. Ryan) came out and told us. He then told mother to bring Paul, Margaret and me to the rectory. And there we stayed.”

The funeral over, the door to the farmhouse was locked that afternoon. With bags and belongings carefully packed, the children ran upstairs and checked their empty bedrooms for any forgotten keepsake. Jimmy and Margaret then returned downstairs. Ten year old Paul remained upstairs, pretending to search the closets and shelves. He wanted to be alone.



Vinny and Edna Johnson homestead, Button Bay, Wolfe Island

He opened a window and looked out at the barns and the quiet water of the bay. A light southwest wind was blowing, causing the quiet waters to ripple. Several ducks were swimming near the shoreline. He could smell the freshly mowed hay

now stored in the big barn. Dad's truck was parked alongside the house.

I guess Uncle Howard and Johnny will see to the cows, he thought.

Overhead, a flock of geese flying in a "V" formation were heading south. He listened as their honking faded away over toward Horne's Point. Summer was over. He stared at the big barn wishing his father would suddenly appear around the corner. *Any minute now. Please, Dad!* His eyes started tearing up as he closed the window. Do we really have to go? It's just not fair! Everything was happening so fast. He hit the windowsill with his fist. He then quietly closed his bedroom door and walked down the stairs. He wiped his eyes clear before anyone saw him.



Johnson 'kids' Paul, Margaret and Jim at Sacred Heart Rectory

Sitting in the backseat of Father Ryan's car, the Johnson kids wondered if they would ever see their home again. The car backed up and then drove slowly out onto the road. Their silent house looked back from the right. Margaret, on the verge of tears, looked toward her brother. Paul smiled weakly back at her then turned and stared silently out the back window. All three children watched their farm grow further and further away, saying nothing.

Life went on for the Johnson's living at the Sacred Heart of Mary rectory that fall. Edna became housekeeper for her brother. Paul and Jimmy did their Sacrament of Confirmation the following day from the accident. Paul was given a reprimand by Archbishop O'Sullivan for not remembering his prayers when asked. He stoically listened as the

Archbishop corrected him. Then he shrugged it off. Returning to the rectory, Paul went about his assigned chores. The huge house, built in 1901, was three stories high and everyone had different jobs to carry out. "It was a different lifestyle," said Margaret, "especially for a fiery red headed 10 year old boy. I won't say he wasn't a challenge; evident when he hit his brother over the head with a crowbar or shooting a b b gun and missing his sister by a few inches."

"Over the next several years Dad would spend his days playing in cemeteries, playing hide and seek in the church basement or running through the fields, getting in trouble," remarked Lisette, Paul's oldest daughter. "He was either causing trouble or being just the unlucky guy in it. After being called 'carrot top' struggling to follow rules and having to fend for himself, he quickly became a fighter. Why not? His only hero had been taken away from him when he was only ten."

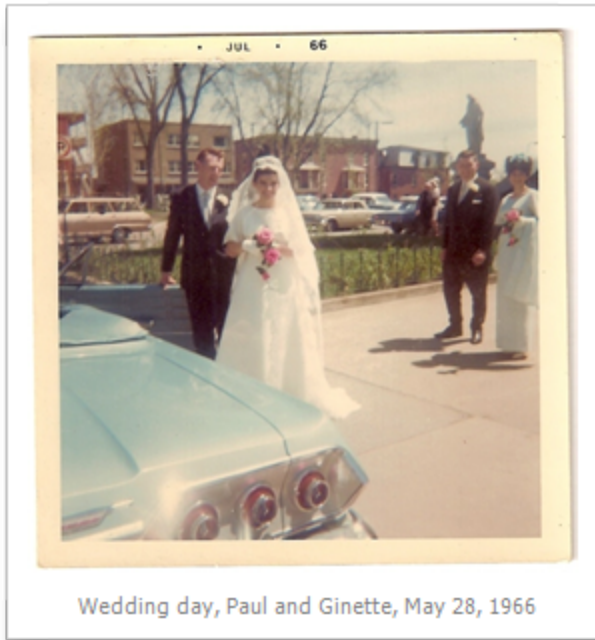
"He was diligent in helping to clean the church, rectory, schools, as well as the grass cutting that went along with it." remembers Margaret. "He still enjoyed his growing up years with hockey and having his own boxing room in the basement of



John ,(the author's grandfather left) and Vincent Johnson (Paul's Dad)

the rectory. He loved his motorcycle. After he graduated from Regiopolis College, he enlisted in the navy,”

An adventurer at heart, the red haired, hot tempered Wolfe Island boy became a sailor. The wandering life offered by the Royal Canadian Navy seemed too good to pass up. “I’m gonna join the navy,” he said, matter of factly at dinner one evening. And that was it. His mother and uncle just stared.



Wedding day, Paul and Ginette, May 28, 1966



HMCS Bonaventure, Seaman AB Paul Johnson's ship

“At HMCS Halifax on the Bonaventure, my dad travelled the world capturing the most beautiful landscapes,” explained Lisette. Paul’s ship, the *HMCS Bonaventure*, in service from 1957 to 1970, was the third and last aircraft carrier to serve Canada. The 630 foot ship, capable of 25 knots, carried five squadrons; up to 34 planes and helicopters embarked at any time. Able Seaman P.V. Johnson was one of 1200 officers and men who served aboard.

“It was in 1965, dressed in his handsome sailor suit, walking the boardwalk of the Chateau Frontenac in Quebec City, when he met this beautiful French woman named Ginette,” said Lisette. “Neither of them could speak each other’s language but they fell in love.”

“When I met Paul, his job was that of an aircraft controller aboard the HMCS Bonaventure,” remembers wife Ginette. “In 1961, the *Bonnie* was in drydocks for refitting in Lauzon, Quebec. In the evening, the crew was off and could come to visit beautiful Quebec City. One summer evening, my three girlfriends and I went for a walk on the Dufferin boardwalk at Quebec’s Chateau Frontenac, and we found ourselves being harassed by a couple of U.S sailors on leave. Paul and his three mates saw our situation and came to our rescue.” The lanky, tousle-haired sailor was instantly smitten with the fair, young mademoiselle. Dusting themselves off, the four sailors watched their American counterparts disappear down the walkway. “We were invited to spend the evening dancing with them at the Shamrock grill and dance Club,” Ginette continued. “Paul asked me to dance, but when the band switched to the ‘Twist’, I found myself twirling alone. He had regained his seat at our table. But sparks had flown between us and he came back to meet me whenever his duties and my studies would allow. I came to learn more English and he understood more French.

“After the *Bonnie* left for Shearwater, Nova Scotia, we corresponded until his honourable discharge from the navy and his return to the Island after which he became an electrician’s apprentice. I came to work as an X-Ray technologist at Hotel Dieu Hospital in 1965 and we were married in Grand-Mere, Quebec on May 28, 1966.”

Three children were born to Ginette and Paul shortly after. A boy and two girls: Andre, Lisette and Anne-Marie. Paul took his family home with him, to the farm on Wolfe Island. “We lived on the family farm for a few years,” said Lisette. “Then my father asked my mother to find something on the mainland. But with one stipulation. It had to be along the water.”

“It was always very important to Paul that his family had a comfortable home,” said Margaret. “He built his own house on Shore Road in Kingston.”

“He built us the most amazing play structures, too,” added Lisette. “He built a fort out of sticks with a trap door, a ‘forest rangers’ look alike. He went to all our sporting competitions and was so proud every time we brought home a medal, scored, won an award or saw we were having fun. His grandchildren Sarah, Nathalie, Callum and Elizabeth Ashley were his pride and joy too. He also had love and time for Alex and Logan, his niece Kristen’s boys.”

While empty, the family farmhouse continued to be the centre of their lives. “Whenever I was back from school Dad and I would head out and putter around,” said youngest daughter Anne-Marie. “In ’98, both Dad and Uncle Jim let me move in to try to bring some life back into it. A lot of precious moments spent with Dad watching deer from the verandah, trying to scare coyotes and admire the wildlife in the bay. Six wonderful years being as close as I could be to my ancestors lives.”



Father Ryan baptises Anne Marie with Ginette, Paul, Lisette and Andre



Paul with son Andre on Button Bay

Paul’s son Andre lives on Wolfe Island in the house his father built for his mother and uncle, after Msgr. Ryan retired, in Marysville. “Dad was always very caring to us,” Andre said. “He worked out of town a lot but when he was home, it was his kids that came first. I remember him taking me to the sales barn on highway 15 just east of Kingston. We were in his father’s 1949 Chevrolet ¾ ton truck with pigs in the back.” Later, when he got married, Andre wanted the wedding and reception at the family farm. “I was driving down the seventh line road towards the farm with a load of chairs and tables. I came upon that same truck, stopped in the middle of the intersection. Looking closer, I saw Dad in the driver’s seat with my Aunt Margaret beside him and his three grandchildren in the box of the truck in the back. Several local residents were admiring the truck. I told myself, ‘yep, that’s what it’s all about’; three generations

of Johnsons enjoying that same truck he used to ride in with his father.

“Dad would take me to hockey every Sunday morning before church, come back home and go back into Kingston for mass,” Andre continues. “We would discuss what I felt needed improving on and what he noticed. I was a goalie for over 12 years. He told me ‘if you feel that’s your position, I’m behind you and we can make it happen’. After my father and mother divorced Dad moved back to the Island, where I lived with him on and off again. I remember restoring the old tractors and helping him out with the farm house and outbuildings. Those are days that I cherish. We would work on fence lines, weld materials, engines and such. I learned a lot from my father. He was a well rounded man and had a lot of talents.”

Lisette remembers her dad’s pitfalls and tumbles, too. “He fell off a working horse and broke his nose... was run over by a steel-wheeled tractor – he was fortunate that the ground was soft and, a week later, broke his leg! He was in a serious truck accident where a farmer found him laying in a field and saved his life. Later, he and his snowmobile tumbled down a dry well!

“This ‘tough guy’ cared for animals, children and believed in Angels. He would sit for hours watching the kids play, swim, run and climb trees. He loved to just sit and talk and found freedom in watching the ships sail by.

“In 2006, dad was diagnosed with COPD, a degenerative respiratory problem that kept his excursions to a minimum. He went on to enjoy Anne Marie living on the family farm where they would watch the moon over the water, listen to the coyotes across



In back: Jimmy Commercial (brother in law), son Andre, from left: Paul, daughters Anne Marie, Lisette and brother Jim.

the bay and putter around making the simplest modifications. He watched his farm come back to life when Andre and Kelly were married and reviving the land and barn, the old cars and tractors.”

“How the entire

family, young and old, worked to make the farm look as it did when our father was alive,” remembered Margaret. “I can still see him walking through the fields and along the shore with that tuque on his head. Nothing pleased him more than to see the family enjoying it.”

Sadly, Paul’s disease progressed until it was necessary for him to leave Wolfe Island once more. On Saturday, October 9, 2010, the family threw a surprise 70th birthday party six days early from his actual date, at Fox Run Retirement Home just outside of Gananoque, where he now resided. The kids presented him a special gift: his ‘navy jumper’ mounted in a special frame. The lanky, tousled-haired tough guy was speechless.

A year later, almost to the day, Paul was in KGH in a room facing Wolfe Island. His three children sat at his bedside. “We kept telling him to look outside and see the beautiful sunrise,” said Lisette. “His eyes were open and after asking me for a glass of water, his breathing began to slow and we knew... Andre, Anne-Marie and I held him, rubbed his forehead, his hands and told him to go – it was time to meet his Mom and Dad. He went in peace and he left us feeling at peace.”

Andre will soon move his family, wife Kelly and daughter Elizabeth Ashley into the renovated family farmhouse. The house and buildings overlooking quiet Button Bay will house a new generation of Johnsons. “Every nail and board or material I remove, reminds me of my dad or grandfather,” he said. “When they built something, it was strong enough to withstand a tornado! Boy, do I know that first hand!”

Margaret and her husband Jimmy Commercial have a cottage just down the hill from the farm. Living in Rochester, N.Y., they have returned to Button Bay every summer since brother Paul helped build their cottage so many years ago now. Every fall, she listens as the geese make their way southward and she realizes it’s time to leave, too. She remembers Paul pointing out ‘falling stars’ once upon a time. “On my first trip back to the cottage after his death, I was standing on the deck that evening when I looked up and yes, there was a star coming right down at me. Yes, Paul, I hear you...

“He was so easy to talk to... so easy to feel close to, and so easy to love. He was strong enough to admit his weaknesses, brave enough to express his fears, free enough to laugh and human enough to



Paul with his mounted 'navy jumper'



Sadly, Paul & Ginette's youngest daughter Anne Marie Johnson passed away suddenly on June 20, 2013. An avid historian, Anne Marie was site manager for Parks Canada's Fort Wellington in Prescott. As her casket left Sacred Heart Church, where she was baptised, an honour guard consisting of the Royal Canadian Rifle Regiment fired a salute for their 'fallen commander' on June 26, the day of the funeral. It was also her 40th birthday.

cry. The two of us, being the sentimentalists of the family, were what reinforced our close relationship.

“I feel so very fortunate and thankful that he was my brother.”

Paul Vincent Johnson was a very big fan from the humble beginnings of the Wolfe Island Historical Society in 2005. Ironically, this took place just across the field from the Johnson farm in ‘Herb Armstrong’s kitchen’ then belonging to founder Victoria Stewart. The idea of preserving the Island’s agricultural history was very important to him and he would often stop on his way and ask Victoria how the society was doing. “Make it work,” he told her. “Make it work!” At his request, donations were made in his name to the WIHS, for which the executive is very grateful.

By Brian Johnson, 2nd cousin.