

SAM JOHNSON | 1930-2020

‘Fearless patriot ... American hero’

Unyielding POW later served 28 years in Congress



A staunch conservative, Sam Johnson represented his North Texas district for decades in Congress after serving 29 years as an Air Force fighter pilot. He saw combat in two wars — surviving torture and deprivation at the infamous Hanoi Hilton. (2001 File Photo)



During the Korean War, Johnson flew 62 missions in an F-86 Sabre named Shirley's Texas Tornado, after his wife. (U.S. Air Force)

By NICK SWARTSELL
Special Contributor

WASHINGTON — Retired Congressman Sam Johnson, a conservative stalwart whose service to country spanned seven years as a prisoner of war and a long stint in the House, died Wednesday in Plano of natural causes. He was 89.

The Plano Republican packed multiple careers into a life defined by endurance, patriotism and sacrifice.

He served 28 years in Congress, from a special election in May 1991 to his retirement in January 2019, after 29 years as an Air Force fighter pilot. He saw combat in two wars — surviving torture and deprivation at the infamous Hanoi Hilton with a mangled hand and other scars — and a bright tenure in politics.

Among his captors, Johnson quickly gained a reputation for stubbornness. Despite extreme pressure, he refused to reveal military secrets or pen “repentance” letters that could be used in North Vietnamese propaganda.

His military career earned him enough distinction and accolades for a lifetime. After his release from North Vietnam, he ran the Air Force Fighter Weapons School, the so-called “Top Gun” institute that turns out some of the country’s best fighter pilots. Later, during his tenure in the U.S. House, Johnson’s diehard nature worked to his advantage, and sometimes to his detriment.

He served as a deputy whip, counting Republican votes, and sat on the powerful House Ways and Means Committee, where he chaired a subcommittee tasked with oversight of Social Security and pensions.

His family announced his death on Facebook: “It is with a heavy heart that the family of Congressman Sam Johnson announces his passing earlier today in Plano, Texas. Sam Johnson was a devoted husband, father, grandfather, great grandfather, and friend, as well as a mentor, patriot, and American hero whose sacrifices will never be forgotten. He is now with his beloved wife, Shirley, and their son, Bob. Together they are reunited in their eternal home with Jesus Christ. More details and information will be forthcoming, but for today we ask for your prayers.”

Former President George W. Bush said: “Laura and I join our community giving thanks for the life of Sam Johnson. He served our country with dignity for nearly 30 years in the United States Congress. Prior to that, the former fighter pilot admirably served the United States in both the Korean War and Vietnam, where he survived seven brutal years as a prisoner of war at the Hanoi Hilton. Laura and I are grateful for this man of humility and patriotism, and we take comfort knowing that he is with his beloved wife, Shirley, again.”

Gov. Greg Abbott called Johnson “a fearless patriot and an American hero [who] dedicated his life to our nation and the state of Texas” and said, “He bravely served as a fighter pilot in the Korean and Vietnam Wars, and his profound sacrifice is something Texans will never forget.”

Rep. Van Taylor, a Plano Republican who succeeded Johnson in Congress, noted that despite 42 months in solitary confinement and ongoing torture, “Sam never broke and never wavered in his commitment to his country.”

“Sam Johnson was a legend — a real life legend,” Taylor said. “Congressman Johnson will forever be enshrined as the embodiment of an American hero and has given our next generation a role model to emulate.”

Dallas childhood

Johnson was born in San Antonio on Oct. 11, 1930, and spent much of his childhood in Dallas.

He graduated from Woodrow Wilson High School and started his Air Force career at 20 while studying business administration at Southern Methodist University. He was part of the first Air Force ROTC graduating class.

After graduating in 1951, he went to flight school at Nellis Air Force Base in Las Vegas to prepare for fighting in Korea. He arrived in Korea in late 1952.

By the time the war ended eight months later, he'd flown 62 missions in an F-86 Sabre named Shirley's Texas Tornado, after his wife, the former Shirley Melton.

"I had never flown a plane — never even flown in a plane — until the Korean conflict entered my life," Johnson recounted in a 1992 memoir, *Captive Warriors*.

After his experience as a flight leader in Korea, he returned to Nellis as an instructor. In 1957, he joined the Thunderbirds, touring the U.S. and Europe as a pilot for the elite Air Force demonstration team.

But another war was brewing, and by 1965 Johnson was in Vietnam, this time flying the F-4 Phantom.

On his 25th mission, Johnson and copilot Lt. Larry Chesley took heavy fire from anti-aircraft guns as they flew reconnaissance near Quang Bing, North Vietnam.

They shot back but their guns jammed. The plane was hit. They bailed out over enemy territory. Both were captured and would spend the next seven years as POWs.

Years of torture

Johnson had broken his right arm, dislocated his left shoulder and injured his back ejecting. He landed in a rice paddy.

Two civilians tried to help him escape, but North Vietnamese soldiers caught up with them. The would-be rescuers fled.

He was taken to the infamous Hoa Lo prison, widely known as the Hanoi Hilton, where the North Vietnamese held especially difficult or valuable prisoners. Among his fellow captives was future senator John McCain, a Navy flier who would end up sharing a tiny cell with Johnson for 18 months.

Like the others, Johnson was subjected to torture and death threats. The wounds he received from ejecting were never properly tended to, and he would have difficulty using his right arm for the rest of his life.

But the worst was yet to come.

In 1967, Johnson was moved to a special unit about a mile from Hoa Lo, known among the Americans as Alcatraz — cells dug out of the courtyard at the Ministry of Defense and reserved for the most non-compliant POWs.

Johnson would face 42 months of solitary confinement, shackled in leg irons in a cell measuring only 3 by 9 feet.

The prisoners communicated by tapping on cell walls. Johnson took pride in being among a select group who defied the enemy so completely. They called themselves “the Alcatraz Gang.”

“It was a strange sort of elation, an excitement almost, that I had been categorized with such valiant men as these,” he recalled in his memoir. “The Vietnamese had chosen only 11. And I was among them. It was an honor, a medal I would wear in my heart.”

For three years, Johnson’s wife — his high school sweetheart, whom he’d married in 1950, just before his senior year at SMU — maintained that he was alive, but couldn’t be sure. Then, in 1969, a letter in his shaky handwriting arrived. Contact after that was intermittent, subject to the whim of the North Vietnamese.

By 1973, the war was nearing a close. On Feb. 12, Johnson and other POWs walked off a plane at a U.S. base in the Philippines. The seven-year test of endurance had ended. He returned home a hero, though he would shrug off the label.

“Shirley is the real hero,” Johnson told a reporter on Valentine’s Day in 2013. “She never once gave up on me. She never stopped caring, praying and loving. Her courage and strength held my family together in some of the darkest days of our lives.”

Johnson was awarded two Silver Stars, two Legions of Merit, the Distinguished Flying Cross, a Bronze Star with Valor, two Purple Hearts, four Air Medals and three Outstanding Unit Awards for his service.

McCain would make his first return trip to Vietnam in 1986. Johnson refused until 2006, when he returned with Shirley as part of a congressional delegation. They spent an emotional hour at the old prison, now a museum featuring mannequins in manacles.

“I might have had a tear or two,” Johnson recounted afterward.

“It was much more stark and depressing than anything I could think of,” Shirley Johnson said.

Back to civilian life

Johnson returned to active duty, retiring in 1979 as a colonel.

He started a homebuilding business in Plano and in 1984 took his first steps into politics with a campaign for a seat in the Texas House. He won handily and was re-elected three times, serving seven years.

At age 60, Johnson decided to go bigger. A congressional seat opened in 1991 when Steve Bartlett stepped down to run for mayor of Dallas. It was a tight primary, with eight Republicans vying for the nomination, including Pete Sessions, who would also become a congressman.

Promising support for the military and fidelity to conservative ideals, Johnson narrowly won a runoff against Tom Pauken, a former Reagan White House aide who became chairman of the Texas GOP in 1994.

In a solidly Republican district, he sailed past Democratic unknown Wayne Putnam that fall. After that, he would face only token opposition as he won reelection time and again, representing Plano, Garland and McKinney.

Though famed as a war hero, Johnson was a political unknown in Washington.

House Speaker Tom Foley didn't recognize the name. Hours before Johnson's swearing-in in May 1991, a spokesman for the Washington state Democrat asked a reporter, "Now, who did he replace?"

But Johnson would make his mark. By 2009, fellow congressmen had voted him the most admired member of the House in a *National Journal* poll. Colleagues cited his steadfast adherence to principle as the source of their admiration.

"When Sam speaks, we listen," Ralph Hall, who served in Congress until age 91, making him the oldest congressman in history, said in 2015. Hall died last year.

Staunch conservative

On issues such as immigration and taxes, Johnson upheld staunch Republican values. He was rated the most conservative House member in 2011 by the *National Journal* based on his voting record, and received near-perfect ratings from many conservative groups.

"America has known few patriots as great as Sam Johnson," said Rep. Kevin Brady, R-The Woodlands, a friend who chaired the tax-writing Ways and Means Committee that Johnson served on. "He helped strengthen Social Security, made health care work better for our nation's veterans" and worked on health policy and the tax code.

In the late 1990s, Johnson floated a bill to abolish the 16th Amendment, which lets the federal government collect income tax — an idea that was popular with the far right long before the tea party came along.

Johnson was also a hardliner on immigration. At the request of House Speaker John Boehner, he joined a bipartisan "gang of 8" that worked in secret from 2009 to 2013 — without success — to find a breakthrough on the contentious issue.

For Johnson, this was a tightrope. His conservative values and constituents demanded a tough stance. But with the Richardson high-tech corridor in his district, he was eager for ways to match employers with more skilled workers.

The effort fell apart when Johnson and other conservatives quit. He cited mistrust over the Obama administration's enforcement efforts, though immigrant advocates accused the GOP side of the gang of caving to political pressure.

Occasionally, Johnson angered Hispanic advocates. In 1996, he quipped to GOP donors that Democratic Rep. Martin Frost might struggle to win reelection because his supporters "don't understand English too well" and might not be able to spot his name on the ballot.

And his unyielding conservatism sometimes caused friction with moderate Republicans — including his old cellmate, Sen. McCain.

Despite their shared ordeal, the two had a chilly relationship in later years, though Johnson had McCain's respect.

"I wasn't really as courageous as Sam Johnson," McCain said in 2003, describing their time as POWs. "I mean that. He suffered a lot more than I did."

When McCain ran for president in 2008, Johnson withheld an endorsement until the senator clinched the nomination.

When McCain sought to ban torture by U.S. forces in 2005, Johnson opposed him — each invoking the moral authority of a former POW.

When McCain sought to normalize relations with the communist government in Vietnam, Johnson resisted.

“We talk, but we’re not that close,” Johnson said at the time. “He’s a senator and I’m a congressman, that’s part of the problem. And you know, we don’t always agree.”

Services were pending.

Staff writer Todd J. Gillman contributed from Washington. Staff writers Tom Benning and Robert T. Garrett contributed from Austin.