

OSCAR G. JOHNSON MEMORIAL HIGHWAY

House Bill 5027 as introduced First Analysis (10-11-01)

Sponsor: Rep. Douglas Bovin
Committee: Transportation

THE APPARENT PROBLEM:

During World War II, 463 soldiers earned the Congressional Medal of Honor, the highest honor the United States gives for heroism and bravery above and beyond the call of duty in combat action. One of the recipients--indeed, the Upper Peninsula of Michigan's only recipient, according to committee testimony--was Oscar G. Johnson, then a private in the U. S. Army.

Private Johnson's heroism on September 16-18, 1944 was extraordinary. While serving as a mortar gunner and rifleman in the fight for Monticelli Ridge in the Apennines Mountains of northern Italy (near Scarperia), Johnson protected the left flank of his company's position against five German paratrooper companies, and repelled six enemy attacks. He killed at least 20 enemy soldiers, was credited with capturing 25 others, and helped rescue two fellow soldiers during a two-day siege. See *BACKGROUND INFORMATION* below.

One of only 37 survivors of the original 205-man B Company, 363d Infantry, 91st Infantry Division, Johnson's bravery has been twice acknowledged by 91st Division leaders since the end of the war. On Veterans Day, November 11, 2000, a portrait of Johnson was unveiled at the Camp White Historical Museum in Camp White, Oregon where the 91st Division was activated in 1942. In addition and earlier that year in July 2000, a new U.S. Army Reserve Center was named in Johnson's honor at Fort Baker, California. The headquarters building serves the 91st Division (Training Support), and is located in the Parks Reserve Forces Training Area near Dublin, California. There a marker reads: "His selfless act in coming to the aid of his fellow wounded soldiers while under enemy fire and relentless vigilance in protecting his unit from enemy counter-attacks has been an inspiration to the soldiers of the 91st Division. Sgt. Oscar G. Johnson is the embodiment of the selfless service, dedication to duty, and love of country with which the officers,

noncommissioned officers, and enlisted soldiers of the 91st Division proudly serve."

It is fitting that Oscar G. Johnson's heroism be acknowledged here in Michigan, his native state. Legislation has been introduced to do so by naming a portion of roadway that passes through Delta, Menominee, and Dickinson counties of the Upper Peninsula, in his honor.

THE CONTENT OF THE BILL:

The bill would designate that portion of M-69 beginning at the intersection of highway M-69 and US-2 in Delta county and continuing northwest to the intersection of M-69 and M-95 in Dickinson county as the "Oscar G. Johnson Memorial Highway." Further, the bill specifies that the transportation department would erect suitable markers to indicate the highway's name, after sufficient private contributions had been received to completely cover the cost of erecting the markers.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Oscar G. Johnson (born: March 25, 1921 in Foster City, Michigan; died: May 13, 1998 Dickinson County, Michigan) was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor in World War II for bravery and heroism demonstrated during battle. Following the war, Johnson returned to help his father on the family dairy farm in Foster City, and then completed a two-year agriculture program at what is now Michigan State University. He found work on a farm north of Lansing, met his first wife, Lawanna, at a local Grange meeting, and they settled in a white wood frame farmhouse situated on 80 acres of land 10 miles from the state capitol (near DeWitt, Michigan) and raised five children. To support his family, Johnson served 30 years in the National Guard in Lansing, where he was foreman of a vehicle maintenance shop and held the rank of chief warrant officer. After his retirement in 1980, Johnson

relocated to the Upper Peninsula, residing in Kingsford, Michigan. His first wife Lawanna Wood and his second wife Jane Wickman, as well as a daughter and a son, preceded him in death. Johnson was a member of Veterans of Foreign Wars posts in Felch and DeWitt, and very involved with the Congressional Medal of Honor Society. He served as grand marshal for a 1994 parade in Iron Mountain that highlighted the Upper Peninsula Association of American Legion Posts' summer convention. In May 1997, he traveled to Lansing to light the Michigan Remembrance Candle at the Capitol as part of a national campaign to renew the meaning of Memorial Day.

The Medal of Honor presented by General Mark Clark to Oscar G. Johnson reads in part as follows: "He practically single-handed protected the left flank of his company's position in the offensive to break the German's gothic line. Company B was the extreme left assault unit of the corps. The advance was stopped by heavy fire from Monticelli Ridge, and the company took cover behind an embankment. Sgt. Johnson (then Pfc.), a mortar gunner, having expended his ammunition, assumed the duties of a rifleman. As leader of a squad of seven men, he was ordered to establish a combat post 50 yards to the left of the company to cover its exposed flank. Repeated enemy counterattacks, supported by artillery, mortar, and machinegun fire from the high ground to his front, had by the afternoon of 16 September killed or wounded all his men. Collecting weapons and ammunition from his fallen comrades, in the face of hostile fire, he held his exposed position and inflicted heavy casualties upon the enemy who several times came close enough to throw hand-grenades. On the night of 16-17 September, the enemy launched his heaviest attack on Company B, putting his greatest pressure against the lone defender of the left flank. In spite of mortar fire which crashed about him and machine-gun bullets which whipped the crest of his shallow trench, Sgt. Johnson stood erect and repulsed the attack with grenades and small-arms fire. He remained awake and on the alert throughout the night, frustrating all attempts at infiltration. On 17 September, 25 Germans soldiers surrendered to him. Two men, sent to reinforce him that afternoon, were caught in a devastating mortar and artillery barrage. With no thought of his own safety, Sgt. Johnson rushed to the shell-hole where they lay half buried and seriously wounded, covered their position by his fire, and assisted a Medical Corpsman in rendering aid. That night he secured their removal to the rear and remained on watch until his company was relieved. Five companies of a German paratroop regiment had been repeatedly committed to the attack

on Company B without success. Twenty dead Germans were found in front of his position. By his heroic stand and utter disregard for personal safety, Sgt. Johnson was in a large measure responsible for defeating the enemy's attempts to turn the exposed left flank."

In an article entitled "Dickinson Native's WWII Heroism Retold" written by Jim Anderson for the *Daily News* on July 12, 2000, one of the 91st Division sergeants recommended Johnson for military honors, and his recommendation was supported by an artillery observer who witnessed the events. The artillery observer says that "Johnson may be the only Medal of Honor recipient from the war who could actually be credited with far more enemy soldiers than officially recognized." Over a three-day period he repelled six enemy attacks. With no officers remaining alive after the fight, it was left to his sergeant and the artillery observer to recommend the honors for Johnson. Fearing that the true magnitude of his heroism would be met with disbelief, they originally proposed a lower award (the Distinguished Service Cross) and fewer enemy dead than they knew to be true. According to the artillery observer, Johnson actually dispatched 42 enemy soldiers (which was ascertained by counting those who died of bullet wounds near his position, lying amidst but distinguishable from many others nearby who were dead from artillery fire). The sergeant and the artillery observer also note that originally the platoon of 32 Germans who surrendered under a white flag of truce, actually surrendered to a combat medic named Chris Christopher, who occasionally passed rifles and ammunition to Johnson. Because Christopher was a noncombatant, he could not be credited with the surrender, and in his stead, Johnson was. The artillery observer notes: "To credit Sgt. (then Pfc.) Johnson with the 42 enemy soldiers he had actually dispatched, and add the additional 32 enemy soldiers who did surrender would have been a somewhat unbelievable accomplishment even for the Medal of Honor." His sergeant observes that he doubts an accurate judgment can be made, but admits he was conservative in the original recommendation. Johnson himself said in an article in the *Lansing State Journal* entitled "Winner Approves of Draft" (3-9-80): "The way they describe my role, it sounds like I might have been a little better than I was." According to his former sergeant, an Army commander changed Johnson's citation to the wording it has today—20 dead and 25 captured. And hearing of his heroism, the military board of officers changed his sergeant's original recommendation from the Distinguished Service Cross to the United States Medal of Honor awarded

by the President of the United States in the name of the Congress.

FISCAL IMPLICATIONS:

The House Fiscal Agency notes that the bill has no state or local fiscal impact. (10-8-01)

ARGUMENTS:

For:

This bill allows the citizens of Michigan, and in particular the citizens of the Upper Peninsula, to express their appreciation for the courage and bravery demonstrated by Oscar Johnson. Clearly, Sgt. Johnson's extraordinary valor deserves public recognition, and a fitting way to memorialize his bravery is to name in his honor a well-traveled highway that spans three of the Upper Peninsula's counties.

Response:

Although recognition of veterans is a worthy, and indeed, laudable aim, the proliferation of signs along the highway has increased with time. In an effort to coordinate sign placement, both to ensure driver safety, and to preserve the natural beauty of the landscape, the Department of Transportation supports an effort to consolidate highway naming processes and procedures, and to limit additional highway sign makers. The proposal is embodied in House Bill 4878 which has passed both the House and Senate during this legislative session, and is currently awaiting enrollment for presentation to the governor. (The Department of Transportation web site [www.mdot.state.mi.us] lists all of the named memorial highways in Michigan.)

POSITIONS:

The Department of Transportation does not oppose the bill. (10-10-01)

Breen Township Board of Supervisors has adopted a resolution to support the bill. (5-7-01)

The Dickinson County Road Commission has adopted a resolution to support the bill. (5-10-01)

The Dickinson County Board of Commissioners has adopted a resolution to support the bill. (5-14-01)

The Delta County Road Commission has adopted a resolution to support the bill. (6-8-01)

According to committee testimony, the Menominee County Road Commission passed a resolution to support the bill. (10-10-01)

Analyst: J. Hunault

■ This analysis was prepared by nonpartisan House staff for use by House members in their deliberations, and does not constitute an official statement of legislative intent.