

Alan Johnson

Wartime dispatch-rider who braved air raids and developed into an accomplished commercial artist

ALAN JOHNSON, who has died aged 99, was a motorcycle dispatch-rider (DR) in the North Africa Campaign in the Second World War and, in civilian life, became a successful artist.

A passionate motorcyclist who bought his first machine aged 17, he enlisted in the Royal Corps of Signals and underwent rigorous training in North Wales as a signalman.

He was posted to North Africa in November 1940. A month after his troopship sailed, his home was completely destroyed by a landmine dropped by parachute.

He spent most of the war in Egypt where he was made up to corporal and posted to 3 GHQ Signals. Subsequently he became a special DR for the 3rd Air Formation Signals. Sabotage and enemy intelligence activity made it essential that the Army and the RAF had their own mail systems for important and urgent communications.

He was issued with a Norton motorcycle and was accustomed to travel as much as 200-300 miles at a time on desert tracks. There was a constant danger of being strafed by German fighters who would dive on a lone DR from behind and it was impossible to hear them over the noise of the engine.

On one occasion he narrowly escaped being killed when he drove through an air raid and a bomber spotted his headlight and attacked him with its cannons. Another hazard was delivering messages at night where there was always a risk of being shot by a nervous sentry.

"Everybody was on edge," Johnson said afterwards. "This time there was a rifle with a hair trigger pointing at my chest. I shouted some good Anglo-Saxon swear words as loud as I could.



Johnson in North Africa, 1942. Below, his painting showing a 'DR' under air attack at night

A German wouldn't have been able to say that and, sure enough, the man didn't shoot me."

Another unpleasant task was waking up an officer in the early hours of the morning. The man would

usually be sleeping in a ridge tent with a hurricane lamp on a string slung between two poles. Sometimes the reaction to the message was distressing. Orders to move his men at once to a new map reference where a big attack was imminent could look like a suicide mission.

Alan Rothwell Johnson, the son of an engineer, was born at Pendlebury, west of Manchester, on April 24 1920. Aged 14, he went to Manchester Arts School to learn to draw. There was widespread unemployment in the 1930s but, before the photography era, everything in catalogues had to be hand-drawn and there was no shortage of work for an accomplished commercial artist.

At the outbreak of the Second World War, businesses stopped advertising and he was made redundant from the advertising studio in Manchester where he worked.

Rather than go on the dole, in October 1939, he signed up as a pantry boy on-board a cargo ship, *Pacific Ranger*, bound for Vancouver.

After the battles of El Alamein, Churchill and Monty met for a conference at the Mena House Hotel, Cairo. Johnson and his five-man unit became their personal DRs. At the end of the war, he and 26 comrades were ordered to make their way back to England.

They left their camp south of Cairo in eight new Willys jeeps and embarked at Alexandria in an American liberty ship which docked at Marseille in April 1945. From there, they went by jeep through recently liberated France and Belgium into West Germany.

On his arrival in England, he helped his parents to rebuild the family home. They had been in the house when the parachute mine destroyed more than

30 houses and reduced theirs to a pyramid of bricks. The pressure wave from the explosion caused his mother to have a stroke and she died within a fortnight of his return.

Johnson returned to commercial art and eventually formed his own studio in central Manchester which he ran successfully until he retired. He remained an enthusiastic motorcyclist and travelled all over Europe.

While he was in Egypt, he became a founder member of the Bar-None Motor Cycle Club. He developed an interest in vintage motorbikes and was out with fellow club members after his 90th birthday when he suffered a stroke which confined him to a wheelchair until his death. As well as motorcycling he was a keen mountaineer, rock climber and caver.

He painted both professionally and, as a pastime, concentrated on ships and landscapes. Two of his ship paintings were accepted by the Royal Society of Marine Artists for their exhibition in 1965-66.

He also painted in the Lake District where he had a second home, and wherever his travels took him. Two of his paintings of Manchester Docks are on display in Salford Art Gallery.

Despite his disabilities, he was able to join other members of the Royal Signals Regiment at the 2016 Remembrance Sunday Parade at the Cenotaph. His adventures are recounted in *Raising Dust in the Desert* (published 2019).

Alan Johnson married first, in 1967, Joyce Metcalfe. She predeceased him and he married secondly, in 1974, Kathryn Walton who survives him. There were no children from either marriage.

Alan Johnson, born April 24 1920, died February 25 2020

