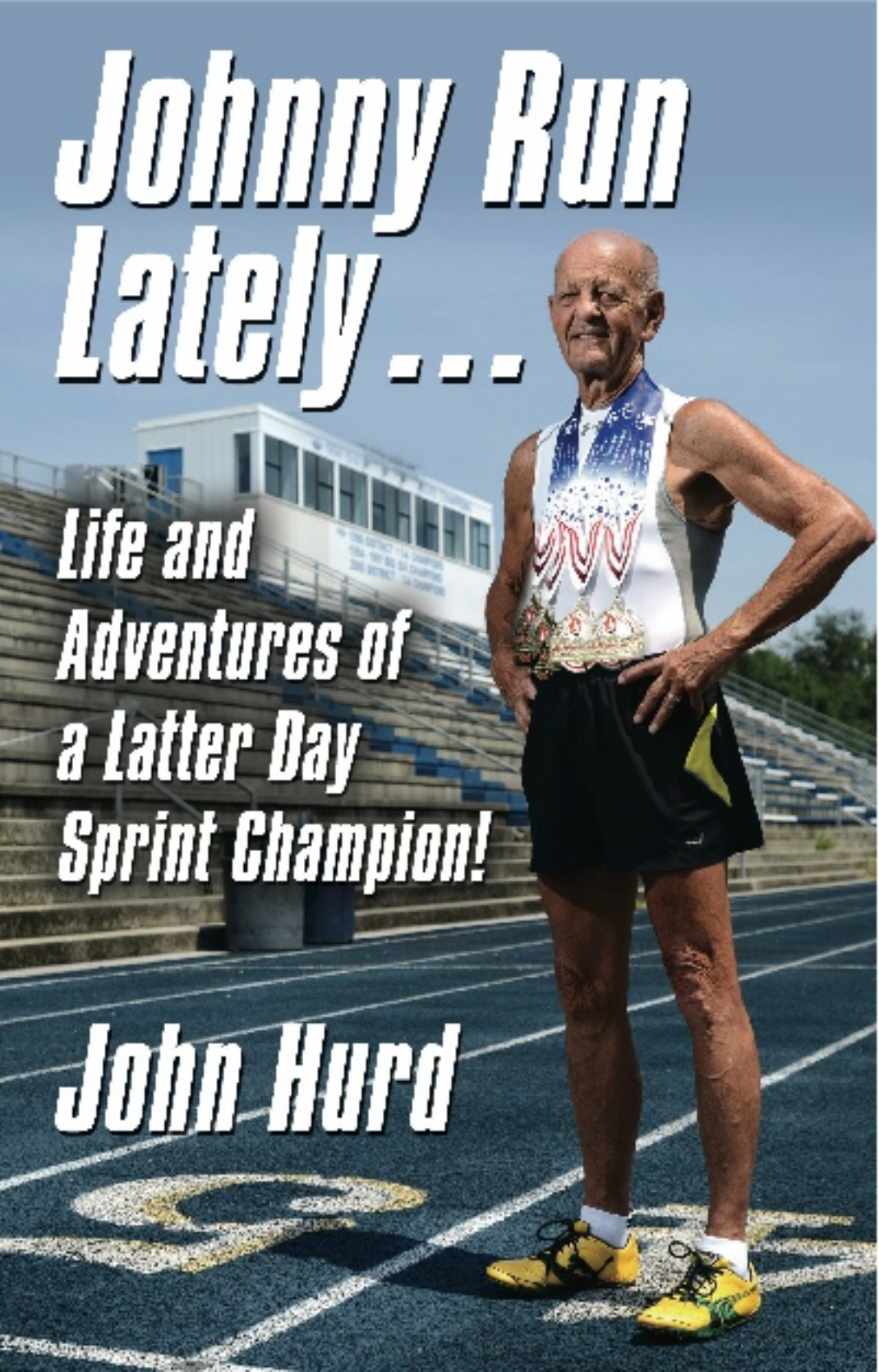
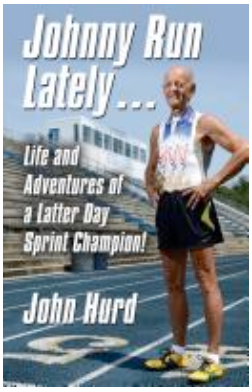
Johnny Run Lately...

Life and Adventures of a Latter Day Sprint Champion!



John Hurd



The life story of a boy who was so small, shy and short of funds that growing up was a challenge. At age 61, he became a sprinter in the National Senior Games, with the dream of an eventual state championship. Twenty years later, he had won 60 championships in six states and, at 81, won national titles in four events. His loving wife encouraged and supported him every step of the way.

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The Life and Adventures of

a Latter Day Sprint Champion

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1
Let's Start at the Beginning…

The leaves were turning red and gold and a chill wind was blowing like a gale. My family lived in a tiny town on the Tennessee bank of the Mississippi River, 10 miles from the nearest light bulb and right on the state line between Tennessee and Missouri, thus the name "Tennemo," where I was born. The maps show a population under 250, the smallest dot they use. It is so tiny that my birth certificate shows Miston, the other tiny town where Cuddin Oscar and his wife Zettie lived. (When a cousin was from an older generation, we addressed them by that title, which rhymes with sudden.) The house we lived in was a small frame house up on stilts, as sometimes the river would flood. The tar paper on the walls did its best to keep the wind from coming through the cracks. Living up that high made it seem even colder on this particular night.

Most of my family were farmers by trade, and they had been working all day in the fields. Cousin Zettie remarked "I sure hope Bill don't send for me tonight, I'm so tired." You see, Mother was pregnant with me and about to deliver. She was just called "Bill" by the family, but her real name was Mary Willie Reeks before she married my father, Elbert Eugene "Jack" Hurd.

It was the night of October 20, 1931, when Mother went into labor and Daddy couldn't get the car started, so he left to go over to Cousin Oscar's house to get help in getting a doctor. I arrived on October 21st, about 10 minutes after midnight, about thirty minutes before the doctor and Daddy came.

There were just me and Mother and three sisters, ages five, three and one, there at home together. Mother said I was the coldest and hungriest of all of her children. I still do much better in warm weather.

There were eventually five of us: my oldest sister Bobbie, then Jo and then Billie (born on Halloween, three days after Black Monday, which kicked off the Great Depression), and then me. Each of us came about two years apart, but my little brother, Walker, came along three years after I did. Mother said Daddy named all of us, and since we were a farming family, he probably wanted boys, so he named all three of the girls with boys' names. However, he had a nickname for each of us. I don't remember Bobbie's, but Jo was called Dago because she loved spaghetti. Billie was Runt, and I was Jabbo. Maybe I actually jabbered a lot in my "Daddy" years, but later I became the shyest person in the history of mankind. Or maybe it was because of my lightning fast left jab. Or maybe not. Walker was Pedro. I don't understand that one either, because he was too young to eat tacos. As for parents' names, in the South we didn't have moms and dads; we had mothers and daddies, or mommas and poppas. And they, like all other grown-ups and people of authority, were addressed as ma'am or sir. No exceptions.

I refer to that time as my "Daddy" years, because barely two months after Walker was born, Daddy, along with another man, was struck and killed by a car while helping someone get his wagon out of a ditch on a rainy night. That left Mother with five kids, ages nine years to two months, and a $54 monthly government check from an injury Daddy sustained in World War I. The closest I came to having a grandparent was

Mother's mother, who died in the 1918 flu epidemic, 13 years to the day before I was born. Mother gave up a scholarship to college to look after her three younger siblings: Louise, Muriel and John.

My memories of Daddy were few but vivid and all good. From the floor up, he looked like a giant. His World War I Army discharge papers listed him as 5 ft. 5½ inches. On my third birthday he tried to tell me "Jabbo's three years old." But I had learned that Jabbo was two years old, so we argued over that with "Jabbo two years old." He would let me drive the horses and wagon in the field and even on the roads. He taught me to say "gee" to turn right and "haw" to turn left, and "whoa" to stop, hence the expression "They don't gee and haw so well together," meaning they think in different directions.

The relatives wanted Mother to split us up into different families, but she would have none of that. We did, however, receive a lot of help from all the relatives over the next few years. We spent time scattered among Mother's siblings and Daddy's aunts. At age four we moved to the town of Dyersburg, Tennessee and lived for a short while with Mother's sister, Aunt Louise Condrey, Uncle Ervin and their daughter Glenda, our only first cousin. Here we finally got electricity and running water and an indoor bathroom.

I never knew where it originated, but I was extremely bashful, and would go to any length to avoid calling attention to myself. I can remember sitting at the dinner table with the family, just waiting and hoping that someone would offer me another biscuit, or another serving of beans. If the offer didn't come, I didn't get it. Even earlier than that, I remember being

at Uncle John Reeks's house (Mother's only brother). They were crowded around me trying to give me a penny if I would just say "please." But the word would not come and I never did get the penny. It was like that all my growing-up years. I just wouldn't ask anybody for anything.

By 1936 all six of us had moved into a two family house in Dyersburg, where each family had three rooms and we shared a common bathroom off the back porch. It had an overhead light bulb with a pull down string, and a commode. The only other source of water was a faucet in the kitchen sink, and it was cold. To bathe we heated water in pans on the wood-burning cook stove and brought a wash tub into the kitchen. The rent was initially $9.00 per month. That's not a typo; it was nine dollars a month.

Next door were Mr. and Mrs. Jernigan, Doris, Polly, and Gene. Gene and I were instantly the best of friends, and remained so until he passed away in 2012. We played football, cowboys, and croquet and made up games all in the lot between our houses. In the summer we would have foot races barefoot on the sidewalk. Gene usually won, because my entire body was barely taller than his legs. When his brother would visit from Memphis (he was 19 or so, and I thought he was so mature), he'd get the boxing gloves out, and work my corner. Gene usually won those too, because besides being so much taller than I was, he was also a southpaw.

We were never poor, we just didn't have any money. The Jernigans had an electric refrigerator, a car, a telephone, a radio, a bathtub with hot water, and most important, they had a daddy. During the nine years we were in that house, we

finally did get a plug-in icebox (refrigerator), a telephone and a radio. Televisions were not around till much, much later. I first heard of them in a newsreel at the picture show when I was about twelve. They said this would be real in our homes in about ten years.

Part of the summer of 1937 we spent in Lucy, Tennessee with mother's other sister, Aunt Muriel (rhymes with curl) and Uncle Henry Walker on their farm. It was there that Uncle Henry taught me how to hold a fork, and he taught me how to smoke – or rather, how not to smoke. He was a smoker, and often he would finish a cigarette and give it to me to throw away in the front yard. I would do that, but not until I had a few puffs off of it myself. I didn't think he caught on to that.

There was another boy that I played with, and he and I got the grandiose idea of collecting cigarettes and taking the tobacco and saving it for a real smoke session the following Saturday. Well, by the time Saturday came we had the tobacco and paper, but nothing to light them with. So I got the brilliant idea of walking down to the store and charging a penny box of matches to Uncle Henry's account. Where that courage came from I'll never know. The man at the store must have ratted on me, because later that day I faced an inquisition. They had me cold. The verdict was that Uncle Henry would bring me my own package of cigarettes the next day, and we would smoke properly. I learned later that he had cleared this risky idea with Mother.

The next day I watched for him all day. Finally, he arrived and I had my own package of Old Gold cigarettes. Of course I couldn't read the label, but I did know the difference between

a camel and a stack of gold coins on the packages. I thought it was a little strange, giving me a different brand that was not the same one he smoked. Anyway, we went to the next room together, where he lit my cigarette, and had one for himself. When we finished them, he stuck another one in my hand, and said “Have another.” Again, I thought that was a little strange, but I was only five years old, so what the heck. About half way through that second one, Aunt Muriel came into the room to call us to supper, (we had dinner at noon and supper at dark) and screamed “Henry, what are you doing?” Actually, I wasn’t very hungry by that time, and that was the last package of cigarettes I ever owned.

Mother used that strategy on me a few years later when I thought I wanted a cup of coffee. None of us in the family drank coffee, but when Cousin Oscar (Zettie’s husband) came to visit, she would make coffee for him. A cup and a half of that stuff, strong and black, was all I needed. It was 25 years later before I had my next cup of coffee.

2
The Early Years

By the fall of 1937 we were all back together as a family in Dyersburg. Although we had little, we were a happy family. At supper time, after we finished, one of the girls would jump up from the table and exclaim "I'm gonna dry." I never figured out why being the one to dry the dishes was so important. They sang songs while they washed and dried the dishes and everything was happy and fun. They sang the popular songs of the time, such as *In the Mood*, *Elmer's Tune*, *Frenesi*, *Amapola*, and *After the Ball Was Over*. My sisters helped take care of me and cooked and cleaned and helped Mother. I still don't cook to this day, because they spoiled me so much.

Mother was always teaching us. The two main lessons were:

(1) If we knew something we were thinking about doing was wrong, then we were not to do it. I can still remember her saying, "I don't care if it's a bent rusty nail. If it is in someone else's yard, it is not yours, and you don't take it." I remember one day when Walker was just barely old enough to walk, Mother sent us to the grocery store for some small item. While there, Walker picked up a piece of penny candy and took it home. Mother sent both of us back to the store to pay for the candy. Between my shyness and the unusual nature of the event, it took the store manager quite a while to understand what I was trying to tell him. When I was a little older I found two $5 bills on the sidewalk. When I took the ten dollars into the house, Mother wanted to buy an ad in the newspaper to locate the person who lost it. Mr. Jernigan, next door, finally convinced her that doing that would be fruitless.

(2) We were meant to be healthy. If one of us came to Mother feeling bad, or something hurt, she might ask us "Well, where did that come from?" and we would say we didn't know. She would usually reply with, "It'll go right back there, then." She wasn't dismissing a real Illness; she just knew more about what ailed us than we did. She believed that you could think yourself into an ailment just because someone you knew had it. I believe I can honestly say that to this day I have never believed that I caught something bad from someone else. I don't remember her preaching that certain foods were bad for you, and some were good. For many years we were very fortunate to be eating at all. She believed that if God put it here for you to eat, it was good. I learned at a very early age to stay well and that good health or sickness usually originated with my thinking. Thanks to Mother, I have managed to stay healthy most of my life and my weight has not fluctuated more than five or ten pounds since I graduated from college in 1956.

Once I started to school I would occasionally do odd jobs to earn money for the Saturday picture show and a bag of popcorn. That came to a total of 15 cents. I would clean Miss Ella's chicken coop or run errands for her. I clipped a coupon from a comic book and sold $4.00 worth of garden and flower seeds to get a Red Ryder BB gun. The price in the stores was $2.95. I grew corn in my back yard and peddled it in the neighborhood from my red wagon. It sold at ten cents for three ears. I earned my first full dollar (and two cents) by picking 51 pounds of cotton, which was much more than I weighed. I even sold doughnuts door to door for a local bakery. That ended in disaster. I knocked on this one door, and two young girls told me to go upstairs and ask their

mother. I neared the top of the stairs and their half-dressed mother started screaming like a banshee. I retired from my bakery sales career at a very early age.

In the summer of 1943, at age eleven, I had my first full time job. Gene's daddy arranged for Gene and me to have a job setting pins in a bowling alley. They had quit making new cars when the war started (WWII), and the Chrysler dealer had his dealership converted into a six lane bowling alley. Today's kids (and parents) would have a tough time believing this, but Gene and I were at work every day but Sunday from 9:00 am till midnight, and often later on weekends. That's 90 hours per week or more. There were no machines; we did it all – lifting the ball to the rail, returning it, and resetting the pins. My weekly earnings were typically ten to twelve dollars, minus Social Security and taxes. And we walked home after midnight unescorted from downtown, about a mile or two.

Our main customers were soldiers from the Army Air Corps base eleven miles away, where the B17 Flying Fortress (a la the Memphis Belle) pilots and crews were trained. Our town had three movie theaters and no bars, so the soldiers bowled. There was a café up front, and I can still hear Tommy Dorsey's "Boogie Woogie" playing about every third selection on the juke box. It is still my favorite tune to play on a tape or CD. (I haven't caught on to iPods yet.)

Shortly before we went to work for the bowling alley, Gene and I had seen the movie "Harmon of Michigan." It was a true story about the 1940 Heisman Trophy winner, Tommy Harmon, tailback "Old 98" from the University of Michigan, and he played himself. Well, there was a soldier who

frequently came to bowl with us, and he was the spitting image of the man in the movie. The other thing noticeable about him was that when he came, some pin boy was going to get hit with a pin. I think I probably had him as a customer more often than the others. That really didn't matter, because the boy in the next lane was as likely to get hit as the one in his lane. Both of us would bring our legs and feet up on the bench, turn sideways and shield our heads as best we could.

After more than 70 years I recently went on the Web and did a Google search for Tom Harmon. Guess what! He flew fighters *and B17s* in the war and earned a silver star and a purple heart. I know I can't prove it, but I'd bet a week's pin boy wages that our friend was the real Tom Harmon. There are way too many coincidences to not be real: the twin brother look, the strength of his arm, the branch of service, the equipment he flew, and the timing. So, Special Agent Gibbs of NCIS fame (aka Mark Harmon), if you're reading this, you could make a big fan of yours and your father's very happy by confirming or denying my supposition.

While I was working at the bowling alley, Mother had taken a Women's Ordnance Worker (WOW) job as a quality control inspector at the Army Ammunitions Plant in Milan, about 40 miles away. You've heard of Rosie the Riveter? She was the poster child of the WOW girls. Depending on Mother's shift, she would leave at ten and get home at ten, am or pm. We saw each other on Sundays. She later became the kitchen manager at the café in the bowling alley.

In January of 1945 we moved to Memphis, where Aunt Louise and Uncle Ervin were doing well with a mercantile company,

and had arranged for them to hire Mother. They even bought a house that we would live in. The job required a car, so Mother bought a 1938 Plymouth, which would be the car I'd later learn to drive in. Still later, at age 19, I would buy my first car, a 15 year old 1936 Chevy Roadster convertible, with a rumble seat. My sister Jo's husband, James Lowery, the best body and fender man around, had bought it as a wreck and restored it to like new condition. I paid him $250 for it in 1951. My next car was a 15 year old 1940 Oldsmobile black sedan, that James said looked like something John Dillinger might have driven. My sister Bobbie's husband, JW Davis, put me on to that one for $125 in 1955. To this day I have never owned a car that ran as quiet and smooth as that one did.

Anyway, before long I was finally in Memphis Technical High School in the tenth grade,. At 5 ft. no inches tall, there was one student that was smaller than I was. Marilyn Hughes, arguably the prettiest girl at Tech, was 4 ft. 11 inches tall. I grew three inches the first year and was still the smallest boy there the next year.

Army ROTC was mandatory for all boys for two years. My uniform was a seamstress's nightmare. The pants had an 8 inch hem; the back pockets merged as one; the shirt sleeves had six inches tucked in, and the bottom half of the shirt pockets disappeared below my waist. One fellow enjoyed calling me half-pockets. The first day of my junior year, I walked into the music classroom and Bill Dickey called out "Hercules." It was like calling a 300 pound man Tiny. The next day Jim McMaster shortened it to Herky, and that was my name for the rest of my school days.

In my first year I bought a snare drum and signed up for the ROTC band, without ever having held a drumstick in my hand. The first day on the marching field, the director told me, “If you’re going to make a mistake with that thing, make it loud so I can correct it.” It is advice that I have given my students in computer classes for the last 30 years. By my senior year I was playing first chair drummer.

In my senior year I took an elective third year of ROTC, and was promoted to captain. There were two very good reasons for going that extra year. I wanted to be an officer so that I might raise enough courage to ask Marilyn Hughes to be my sponsor. She would wear a white uniform, march with the company, and attend the social functions with me. I did finally get up the courage to ask her, and she accepted and actually seemed pleased. The second reason I took another year was so that I would have a uniform to wear to school three days a week without having to buy it. My wardrobe was pretty much blue jeans and tee shirts (the white ones, like Special Agent Gibbs wears *under* his shirt).

After I graduated in June of 1949, Walker enrolled the next fall. The first day of registration he was in the hall when Captain Kirschner, the head of the ROTC program, stopped him and asked him for his name. When he told him his name the Captain said “I thought so. You’re Johnny’s brother. What instrument do you play?” When Walker told him he didn’t play an instrument, he came back with “You’d better learn one. You’re in the band.” That day Walker came home and said, “Johnny, show me how to hold a pair of drumsticks.” Until a very few years ago, Walker was still playing, with Gene Jernigan’s (Dyersburg friend) 17 piece orchestra and with a

small Dixieland combo that he, Gene, Bob Osburn and a few others had put together back in the 60s.

During the last week of high school, a bunch of us joined the Naval Air Reserves, and attended an eight week modified boot camp at the Naval Air Station in Millington, just 18 miles out of town. After the "Summer Cruise," as the Navy called it, I went to weekend drills once a month, and was on active duty two weeks in the summer. I was assigned to a squadron of TBM Avengers, the same kind of torpedo bomber that George H. W. Bush had been shot out of. Bush's plane was named TBF – same plane, different manufacturer. I had volunteered to be a combat air crewman, either turret gunner or radioman, they didn't specify which, but it never came about.

In the fall I enrolled in Memphis State College, but dropped out in November and went to work for the Quaker Oats Company's chemical plant as an office messenger, which involved maintaining the Purchasing Agent's inventory files, managing the mail room and running errands. I drove a company car home at night, so I could pick up the mail on my way to work in the mornings. I loved the job and all the people there. Then in June of 1950, the Korean "conflict" began.

A few days later I got a phone call from a close friend from high school, Edgar Buffaloe, my boxing mentor. He was turning 19 and worried about the draft, and asked how he could get into my squadron so we could serve together as our choice. So he signed up, and the personnel officer told him they had no opening in my squadron, but he would put him in VF791, the fighter squadron, and move him later. Hah! Before he got his uniforms and sea bag issued, that squadron got

orders to active duty. The Navy needed those F4U Corsairs, fighter planes, right now. Within a few days they were in San Diego and training for combat aboard the USS Boxer. Wasn't that a fitting name for his ship? I've never told Edgar this, but it was probably Jim McMaster who got the last spot in my squadron. Jim's serial number was 333-6917 and Edgar's was 333-6918.

It seems the TBM torpedo bombers were outdated, so in November of 1950 three of us (just 3) from our squadron were issued individual orders. On Wednesday, January 10, 1951 I reported for duty, and was sent to the Naval Air Station at Jacksonville, Florida. The other two were assigned right there at NAS Memphis.

On Monday the 15th, I boarded a train for the 24 hour ride to Jacksonville with five others who had been called back to duty. They taught me how to play penny ante five card stud poker, and I made $2.95, enough to call my girl-friend after we got settled in. When we reached the station Thursday morning, it was about ten o'clock and we were hungry. We found the café in the station and took seats at the counter. There were six of us, one Rebel and five real live Yankees, from Wisconsin, Michigan, Pennsylvania, New York and Illinois. When one of them asked if we were too late for breakfast, the waitress said "Yes sir, I'm sorry, but we're all out of grits." They all looked at me, and one said "Hey, Ridge Runner, what the heck are grits?" I said "I have no idea. What's a ridge runner?" I had never seen a bowl of grits, and my home was maybe 200 miles from the nearest ridge.

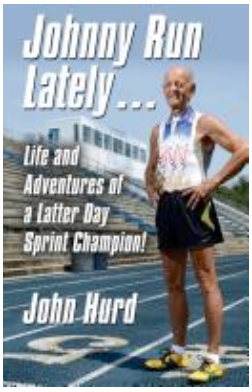
Upon reporting for duty I was put to work at the Naval Air Technical Training Center, (NATTC), assembling lockers in barracks that had not been used since WWII. After that I was assigned to the Disbursing Office as a messenger, which means I sat around most of the day with nothing to do. I developed an affinity for the new Friden electro-mechanical desk calculators they were using to calculate the payroll, etc., and pitched in to give me something to do.

I never flew in a Navy plane again, except once as a hitchhiker for a weekend hop home to Memphis. So I changed my rate from aviation to disbursing clerk and spent the next two years paying the troops. I also never set foot aboard a Navy ship. When Jim McMaster heard about my getting individual orders, and the squadron staying on the ground, he quit the Naval Reserve and joined the Marine Corps. He returned home with a bronze star and two purple hearts.

After a year in Jacksonville I was transferred to NAS Memphis where I served my last year and was released to inactive duty on Friday January 9, 1953. I had already enrolled at Memphis State College (now University of Memphis), and classes had begun four days earlier. Thanks to the leading chief petty officer, with whom I didn't enjoy the best of relationships, I didn't get out of there as early as I would have if my immediate chief had been running things. Anyway, I rushed home to change clothes and catch a bus to the campus for what classes I could make that day.

Unfortunately, when I got home there was nobody there and I had no key. So I did the natural thing; I crawled through a window, changed out of my uniform and high-tailed it to MSC.

I learned later that the lady next door, who had seen me come and go in that uniform for a full year, called the police to report that a sailor was breaking into her neighbors' house. I was gone before they got there.



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