

Major General (Ret'd) Leonard Verne Johnson, CD, LLD



**JOHNSON, Leonard Verne, Major General, (Ret'd), CD, LLD** - Born in Ridgedale, Sask to the late Vera and Joseph Johnson, Dad is survived by his loving wife of 59 years, Shirley; four brothers; four children; seven grand-children; and his beloved furry friend, Barney. He joined the RCAF in 1950; his intelligence, work ethic and the support of Shirley propelled his career upward. After his retirement in 1984 Dad was able to devote his time and effort to working for global peace. Dad wrote a book about his story, *A General For Peace* (Lorimar 1987). Dad was a Member of the International Council for Pugwash Conferences on Disarmament and World Affairs that was awarded the 1995 Nobel Peace Prize. An Honourary Doctorate of Laws from York University soon followed in 1998. We are very proud of what Dad accomplished in his lifetime. His integrity, honour and philanthropy moves and inspires all of us. Dad's Memorial Service will be at the National Military Cemetery at Beechwood in Ottawa in the spring of 2014.

*By Juli Johnson, daughter*

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*By Walter Dorn*

**Major-General (ret'd) Len Johnson** was a great inspiration to us in the Pugwash movement, both in Canada and internationally. He had a unique combination of military expertise and peace activism – which I later saw combined with spirituality. He could argue for nuclear disarmament with conviction and direct experience. He built a wonderful relationship with one of the pioneers of peace research, Anatol Rapoport, and even secured an honorary doctorate for the pacifist at the Royal Military College of Canada. That relationship helped forge links between Science for Peace (where Rapoport was President) and Canadian Pugwash (where Johnson was chair). He brought new thinking to our nation's military leaders as Commandant (1980-84) of the National Defence College (NDC). When visitors come to visit me at the Canadian Forces College, I often point to his picture at the hallway containing NDC official portraits, and I praise his book "A General for Peace." He was so committed to his cause that he ran for federal parliament in the 1988 election, making so many good points as the Cold War was ending but so many others did not know it. The NDP proudly adopted "their general." So many of his world views have borne out in world affairs. He was on the right side of history. Those of us who interacted with him drew strength from his

convictions and activism. We owe him immensely. He exerted a powerful peaceful influence on my own maturation in international affairs. The world has lost one of its great generals for peace.

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## On the road to peace with Len Johnson

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by Ernie Regehr

November 26, 2013 <http://peacequest.ca/on-the-road-to-peace-with-len-johnson/>

I first met Major-General Leonard V. Johnson during his final military posting, as Commandant of the National Defence College. I was at the NDC in the mid-eighties to talk about the Canadian peace movement to that year's cohort – an interesting amalgam of military officers, civil servants and business leaders that the NDC (which operated from 1948 to 1994) brought together annually.

Gen. Johnson invited me to lunch in the NDC mess hall and, not knowing him at all, I was frankly expecting to hear what I had learned to expect from senior Canadian military leaders at the time – a confident rehearsal of conventional Cold War wisdom. But, beginning even with the soup, there was the Major-General, in full uniform, energetically inveighing against all the sacred dogmas that, he lamented, informed his colleagues and the Canadian Forces that he clearly admired and proudly served.

"The world is heading for change," he said, "and military thinking and strategy aren't remotely close to facing up to it."

The "Len" who I later came to know was generally low-key, but on this occasion he was animated and even angry. I kept thinking, "General, you've really got to tone it down, the others are going to *hear* you."

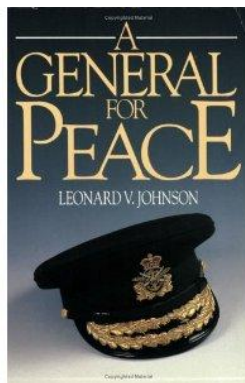
But, of course, Len was bent on being heard. As far as he was concerned, that was the whole point of the NDC – getting at as much critical research and analysis as could be crammed into its interactive style of study, openly challenging well-worn truths. The NDC turned out to be his road to Damascus, in slow motion.

### Cooperation over competition

He was a voracious consumer of all NDC course materials, lectures and debates. One speaker who made a lasting impression on him was Anatol Rapoport, the brilliant Russian-born mathematician who spent the latter part of his career at the University of Toronto developing game theory and demonstrating the utility of cooperation over competition – in international and security relations just as certainly as in the personal and national spheres.

Len reported that when Prof. Rapoport led the NDC class through the Prisoners Dilemma game, it demonstrated persuasively that competing armed forces were "unwittingly cooperating to maintain the institution of war."

By his own characterization, Len became a Rapoport disciple, convinced of Rapoport's prescription for war prevention – the "suffocation of the institution [of war] by denying it the resources on which its life depends." Suffocating war, Len came to conclude, is not an impossible dream; indeed, he repeatedly insisted that "the future of humankind depends on it."



'General for Peace'

In 1984, not long after our first meeting at NDC but 34 years after he joined the Royal Canadian Air Force, this "General for Peace" retired from the Canadian Forces. But Len Johnson wasn't about to let the first class education he had gained at the NDC go to waste. He made sure his voice would be heard – travelling his particular road to peace as a writer, speaker and even a preacher. He was active in

organizations like the international Pugwash movement, and, of particular moment for me, Project Ploughshares (where he served as Board Chair from 1989 to 1994).

As he explained in his well-received 1987 memoir, *A General for Peace*, he became a General for peace and disarmament. But he was also careful to point out that he was not a General who became a pacifist, though some of his new admirers might have hoped for that.

## Worked for nuclear abolition

Yet Len happily accepted the label of “nuclear pacifist.” The abolition of nuclear weapons was at the core of his work with Ploughshares. In 1996 he joined a particularly esteemed international group of Generals and Admirals, some then still in service, to sign on to a highly regarded and widely circulated “[Nuclear Weapons Abolition Statement](#).” In the wake of the Cold War, these military leaders reasoned, whatever may once have been the rationale for nuclear arsenals, it no longer held. So they told the world’s civilian leaders that “the existence of nuclear weapons...constitutes a peril to global peace and security and to the safety and survival of people we are dedicated to protect.”

The statement acknowledged challenges and obstacles that included genuine security concerns of states possessing or seeking the “ultimate” weapon. But, it reflected Len Johnson’s thinking that there is no alternative to the “complete and irrevocable elimination of nuclear weapons.”

More than a decade later his conviction had not waned, and he told an international Pugwash conference that “it’s up to us, the victims of nuclear terror, to liberate ourselves and our children from the threat of omnicide, the death of all living things.”

## Re-imagining defence policy

Convinced that both nuclear weapons and the institution of war would have to be abolished if the human community were to survive, he nevertheless encouraged civil society support for a re-imagined military defence policy. At one point, [in an interview with \*Peace Magazine\*](#), he even gave qualified approval to the old Roman dictum that “if you would have peace, prepare for war.” But his qualification was a big one. He supported proposals for “defensive” or “non-provocative” defence postures. Military forces ought not, in the age of unprecedented conventional destructive capacity, to be about the capacity to wage offensive war. Instead, the focus should be on defending one’s own territory and sovereignty in ways that were demonstrably incapable of threatening neighbors.

“If all nations were capable of defending their national territory,” he said, “then we wouldn’t have any need for alliances.” Furthermore, “if they were all defensively postured, there wouldn’t be the capability for war.” Len opposed defence postures built on high mobility, force projection, and the capacity to attack another states’ forces and populations.

“Military security is protecting your own territory and your own values against the armed forces of other states. It has nothing to do with offensive warfare.”

[As a serving officer and student of war](#), he once said, “I learned that warfare among modern states cannot be waged without destroying the values it is intended to defend.”

Len also became fully convinced that transforming public opinion and nurturing an informed electorate were essential to building momentum toward both nuclear disarmament and ending the resort to war. In early 2003 he wrote optimistically that “[people everywhere are withdrawing their consent to war](#).” The context was opposition to the proposed attack on Iraq. Though Washington ended up going to war without either formal or public consent, Len was still convinced that public attitudes toward war were undergoing significant change. While acknowledging that “there’s nothing so hopeless as an idea whose time has *not* come,” he remained convinced that “once that time comes, there’s nothing so powerful.”

## Strategic for real change

He kept reminding us that real change doesn’t require getting everyone on side. “Someone has said that if you have five percent of the people in the country embrace an idea, that idea is well established; if 15 or 20 percent support it actively, it is unstoppable.”

But he insisted that you have to establish credibility and be supported by persuasive arguments and compelling evidence. One thing that sustained his hope was the peace movement’s credibility. “I’ve been impressed,” he said, “by the level of technical knowledge that people in the peace movement have, or have access to. It’s just as sophisticated and as good as anything that the defence establishment possesses.”

He was convinced that the movement’s compelling ideas had to become “established in the elected people who respond to the voice of the people.” On the Ploughshares Board he guided us through the early years of the post-Cold War period, encouraging us to draft credible

and practical proposals for a new Canadian defence policy that would respond to the new realities and the twin objectives of the abolition of nuclear weapons and of war itself.



## Running for office as walking the talk

Always one to walk the talk, he signed up to run for the New Democrats for a seat in Parliament. Beth Pater worked on Len's 1988 campaign in Kingston and the Islands. She describes him as "an ardent campaigner who eagerly went door to door and relished speaking with people." His wife Shirley, says Pater, was also hugely supportive of his effort. Pater describes a key moment in the campaign when Len and the then Leader of the NDP, Ed Broadbent, spoke to a capacity crowd. She credits Len with bringing a significant number of new members into the party in the area. The NDP registered a seven per cent increase in its vote when Len ran.

In their retirement, Len and Shirley (his wife of 59 years) lived for many years on a rural acreage near the village of Westport. When you visited, the charm of the place was a perfect reflection of its occupants. Inside, rustic and informal and weighed down with books, journals, and newspapers. Outside, fields of green emerging from the decades of neglect the property had suffered before they acquired it.

## Future planting

John Barker, a colleague of Len's on the Ploughshares Board, was also a former military man. John later became a United Church minister and describes his visit to the Johnson "farm":

"Len and Shirley's home was environmentally friendly. I think it faced south with lots of glass and was built into a slope on the north side. He, as an air force officer, had seen the land he had purchased from the air. He described it as a farm field that had been mined. Len had planted a lot of trees and he showed me those young trees, naming them as we walked among them. When I saw him somewhere years later and asked about the trees he answered, pleased, 'I have a forest.'

## Reclamation

"Every day in his retirement farm, Len read an Ottawa newspaper, the Kingston newspaper, and at least one Toronto newspaper. Shirley took the old newspapers and laid them on the ground around the house. She wet them down to hold them down and composted them. The land reclaimed from the barren field stretched out a long way from the house. Only near the edge of reclaimed land did I recognize the composting newspapers. Plants they wanted were poked down through the newspapers as the papers also acted to keep down weeds. There was good soil for a long way all around the house."

The peace and quiet of their rural retreat did not protect Len from inevitable moments of despair. In a [2001 sermon](#) in St. Paul's Anglican Church in Westport, he confronted the anguish of a world in perpetual war: "What is this thing called peace? We pray each Sunday for peace in the Middle East, Northern Ireland, Chechnya, Kashmir, Macedonia, Colombia and wherever else there is conflict, imploring God to rein in the passions, damp the powder of warring armies, smooth the wrinkled front of grim visag'd war, succour the victims, and return the refugees to their homes. And yet the wars continue. Peace has become a name for war by other means."

## Peace as a state of being

Len never wavered in his commitment to making peace the real thing. Naturally, he supported the pursuit of formal peace treaties and disarmament agreements. But he also insisted that “what we need to understand is that treaties of human agreement are not enough.” On that August day the Major-General was in church, looking for a peace that would not be won by armies. He finished with the words of a character in a [Rudy Wiebe novel](#), describing the way one might live peace in a more practical and durable way:

*you show wisdom, by trusting people;  
you handle leadership, by serving;  
you handle offenders, by forgiving;  
you handle money, by sharing;  
you handle enemies, by loving; and  
you handle violence, by suffering.*

He called his parting thoughts that Sunday morning counter-intuitive and he never claimed that he had managed to fully live them. “That’s more courage than most of us can muster,” he confessed.

But Len Johnson had the courage to travel a road toward peace that was both practical and visionary. His great legacy is that he still invites us to join him on that noble journey.

Leonard Verne Johnson was born in Ridgedale, Saskatchewan and died in Kingston, Ontario in November 2013. He is survived by his wife Shirley and by four children and seven grand-children. A memorial service is to be held at the National Military Cemetery at Beechwood in Ottawa in the spring of 2014.



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