

DAKOTA IMAGES

Royal Cleaves Johnson, lawyer, congressman, and champion of military veterans, was born in Cherokee, Iowa, on 3 October 1882 to Elias Johnson and Philena Everett Johnson. In 1883, the family moved to Highmore, Dakota Territory, where Johnson attended public school. He later studied at Yankton College and graduated from the University of South Dakota in 1906. Returning to Highmore, he practiced law and served as Hyde County state's attorney in 1908 and 1909. Johnson married Florence Thode on 5 October 1907 and in 1913 moved his law practice to Aberdeen.

In 1910, Johnson won election as South Dakota's attorney general and, at the age of twenty-eight, became the youngest attorney general in the United States. In 1914, he ran for Congress on the Republican ticket and won the first of eight consecutive terms in the United States House of Representatives.

Johnson voted against the entry of the United States into World War I but became the first congressman to enlist in the army once war was declared. He served with Company K of the 313th Infantry and was wounded at Montfaucon in the Meuse-Argonne attack on 27 September 1918. He received an honorable discharge on 20 December 1918, having attained the rank of first lieutenant. The United States awarded Johnson the Distinguished Service Cross for extraordinary heroism in action, and France awarded him the Croix de Guerre with a Gold Star.

During hospitalization for his war injuries, Johnson learned firsthand of the chaotic state of veterans' services, which were scattered throughout numerous federal agencies. He became a staunch advocate for the objectives of the American Legion, introducing the first American Legion-initiated hospital legislation for veterans and a bill to incorporate the organization. From 1929 to 1932, he served as chair of the House Committee on World War Veterans Legislation. While in Congress, he also helped to reform the military court-martial system. Johnson was a charter member of the Aberdeen American Legion post and continued his membership until his death.

Johnson served in the House until 1933, when he resumed practicing law in Washington, D.C. He died on 2 August 1939 following a heart attack and is buried at Arlington National Cemetery. The Royal C. Johnson Veterans Memorial Hospital in Sioux Falls was named in his honor and dedicated 24 July 1949.

—Carol Jennings



Royal C. Johnson

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