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# Little Minnesota In World War II: The Stories Behind 140 Fallen Heroes From Minnesota's Littlest Towns



## Synopsis

Small towns. Big heroes! During World War II, men from Minnesota's smallest towns gave their lives for our country. Several were awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, Distinguished Flying Cross, Silver Star, or Bronze Star. All received the award no one wanted: the Purple Heart. *Little Minnesota in World War II*, by Jill A. Johnson and Deane L. Johnson, honors 140 brave men from the smallest rural towns. From John Emery (who died December 7, 1941, on board the USS Arizona) to Herman Thelander (who was lost in the Bermuda Triangle, a mystery unsolved to this day), this unique book allows you to experience the war through personal accounts of the men and their families. Photos from the war, scans of actual letters, journal excerpts, and family memories create a one-of-a-kind book that brings history to life with stories from Pearl Harbor, the Pacific, the Invasion of Normandy, and beyond, and that combines local history with World War II nostalgia.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Jill A. Johnson grew up in the Minnesota towns of Strandquist, population 69, and Karlstad, population 760. In 2007, her father returned from a 50th class reunion for the first class he taught in Strandquist. His comment that "all the tiny towns would be gone in a few years" sent Jill and her husband, Deane L. Johnson, on a journey across Minnesota to write *Little Minnesota*. When researching the state's smallest towns, the Johnsons were astounded at the number of men who died in World War II. They both grew up listening to stories of uncles and family friends who served in World War II, a war in strange lands, unknown to many in rural Minnesota. *Little Minnesota in World War II* tells the story of the men who died in the war in a heroic

effort to defeat Adolph Hitler, Benito Mussolini, and Emperor Hirohito. Jill, a retired physical therapist, lives with Deane, a retired physician, photographer, writer, and musician, and their beagle, Kallie, the namesake of Beagle Books, the bookstore they founded in Park Rapids in 2001.

Aaron Luverne Johnson - Dovray (Murray County) U.S. Navy, USS Houston CA-30, Shipfitter  
Fireman Third Class January 18, 1917 - February 4, 1942 - Battle of the Flores Sea, Dutch East Indies  
John Johnson recalls his uncle: Everyone called him Luverne and he was a fun-loving guy who liked girls and cars. I remember the day I rode with him, my grandparents, and my father to the train station in St. Paul in my dad's 1940 Buick. I can still picture Uncle Luverne waving to us from the window as the train pulled away. My grandmother was beside herself with worry. Following his graduation from Dunwoody Institute, Minneapolis, Aaron Luverne Johnson worked on the family farm until his navy enlistment August 3, 1938. He was exactly what the navy wanted according to a Navy Department memo written in 1919: The boy from the farm is considered by the naval recruiting service to be the most desirable material. During basic training at the Great Lakes Naval Training Station in Illinois, Luverne qualified as a shipfitter who worked with sheet metal and plumbing, and he also sang in the Navy Choir. He later earned deep-sea diver certification in Bremerton, Washington, and Pearl Harbor before moving to the Philippines. After basic training, Luverne was assigned to the USS Houston, President Roosevelt's favorite warship. In a letter dated March 5, 1939, Luverne wrote of the President's friendliness to the sailors: I can say I have been fishing with the Prez. He is a real guy. He can't walk but he is always happy. During a furlough at home, Luverne told his father, "Dad, be sure you look me up a nice team of bay horses, for I'm all set to go farming when I get back." His dream of returning home to farm ended during the Battle of the Flores Strait, also known as the Battle of Makassar Strait, in the Java Sea in the Dutch East Indies. Near midnight on February 3, 1942, the USS Houston joined an American-British-Dutch-Australian (ABDA) fleet to search for a Japanese fleet consisting of 20 troop transport ships, 3 cruisers and 18 destroyers. In a personal interview, Captain Arthur Maher, Gunnery Officer, reported: The Houston was ordered to go up and accompany some Asiatic Fleet destroyers into a night attack. However, unfortunately, at the last minute Marblehead and the destroyers, both Dutch and American, were at anchor south of Madoere Island just outside of Soerabaja. There was no question but that they sighted our fleet but they made no attempt to attack. The conference broke up quickly and the fleet got underway and proceeded to sea with the units disbursing and orders to rendezvous the next morning. So, on the 4th of February, we were all joined up again and headed in the direction of the Celebes when we

were attacked by approximately 54 heavy Japanese bombers. The bombers singled out the Houston and the Marblehead as their targets and for approximately an hour both ships were under severe attack. The Marblehead was hit by two bombs and badly damaged. The Houston was proceeding to the assistance of the Marblehead when she was struck by a large caliber bomb just forward of the after turret. This did considerable damage in that it disabled turret three, killed 48 men and wounded approximately 20 more. Shipfitter Fireman Third Class Aaron Luverne Johnson was one of those killed aboard the USS Houston. With a disabled ship and many casualties, Rear Admiral Karel Doorman ordered the Houston and Marblehead to Tjilatjap, a port city on the island of Java, for repairs and burial in a Dutch cemetery. Following repairs, the Houston continued service with the ABDA fleet. Much of the fleet, including Doorman's flagship, was sunk soon thereafter. On February 28, the Houston and Perth entered Banten Bay where Japanese destroyers sank the Perth. The Houston fought on until midnight when she, too, was torpedoed and downed. From the original crew of 1,061 men, just 368 survived, only to be interned in Japanese prison camps. The Japanese victory strengthened their control of Makassar Strait and the Dutch East Indies. Following her son's death, Gunda Johnson made multiple button plates, treasured family keepsakes, to cope with her grief. On February 14, 1950, Aaron Luverne Johnson was reburied in Our Savior's Cemetery, Dovray, Minnesota. On February 19, 1942, the Murray County Herald eloquently reported the death of Aaron Luverne Johnson, the second man to die from Dovray in World War II: A second son of Murray County has given his life that freedom and the decent things of life may continue in the world. A message received by Mr. and Mrs. John Johnson, of Dovray, from the U.S. Navy department last Thursday brought the sad news that their son, Aaron Luverne, had been killed in action. And so, though separated from the war zone by vast open prairies, massive mountains and great spans of ocean, the seemingly peaceful and obscure little community and village of Dovray was called upon to spare another of her fine and noble sons.

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