

John S. Lekson

Government/Military



John graduated from Collinwood High School in June 1935 in the midst of the Great Depression that crippled the U.S. economy. John's high school homeroom teacher advised him to pursue a college scholarship funded by the Board of Education. Despite the family's lack of sufficient funds, he was encouraged by them to attend the School of Education at Western Reserve University in Cleveland. Through his resourcefulness and diligence, John earned enough credits to graduate in 1940 with a Bachelor of Science degree in education with minors in geology and international politics.

In 1940, the world was anxiously watching developments in Europe and the Far East as escalating military skirmishes appeared as precursors to widespread warfare. John noted these events and decided in September 1940 to enlist as a private in the 37th Infantry Division of the Ohio National Guard. In October 1940, this division was federalized and integrated into the regular Army. Lekson's unit was stationed in Mississippi and trained for combat during 1941. On December 7th, 1941, following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the U.S. declared war on Japan and subsequently entered the war in Europe. John, who had received rapid promotions to Sergeant, entered Officers' Candidate School at Fort Benning, GA (home of the infantry). He received his Second Lieutenant's commission in May 1942. Shortly after he received his commission, he volunteered for parachute training. He earned his parachute wings and was assigned to the Parachute Infantry Regiment.

In April 1943, John and his unit sailed for North Africa, which was a combat training ground for parachutists. In July 1943, he and his unit parachuted into Sicily to commence a journey of 150 miles up the western coast of the island. After the fall of Sicily to the Allies, John's unit was ordered to parachute into Salerno on the Italian mainland. His unit captured the nearby town of Albanella and then attacked Altavilla where they were cut off from the beach-head by German forces. His unit held their positions until reinforcements arrived. Their actions in conjunction with the support of the reinforcements were "responsible for saving the Salerno beach-head" in the words of General Mark Clark, Commander of the Fifth Army. During the remainder of 1943 and into the Fall of 1944, John and his unit participated in the war effort through combat in Italy and training in England. In September 1944, John's unit saw combat in Holland. As Operations Officer for his regiment, he planned the move of the unit to France in November 1944 as the Holland campaign wound down. Later that same month, he and the G-3 staff worked all night long to move an entire combat division on "cattle trucks" to Belgium to fight the Battle of the Bulge. In December 1944 the battle turned in favor of the Allies. After a surge through German lines (launched in January 1945), in difficult winter weather and heavy combat, John (now Major Lekson) returned to France. For the remainder of the war to May 1945, John saw combat in Germany. In

Germany he saw one concentration camp and witnessed a stack of cadavers and feeble, emaciated inmates.

At the conclusion of the war in Europe John was transferred to the U.S., as a Division Operations Officer, to prepare his unit for combat in Japan. However, in August 1945 two atomic bombs were dropped on Japanese cities which forced the Japanese to surrender. John's unit remained in the U.S. at Fort Bragg. After having served 32 months overseas, John was discharged from active duty in January 1946.

In October 1945, John married, Gladys Pecsok, his college sweetheart. He then began working for the Veterans Administration, supervising the enrollment of returning soldiers under the GI Bill. However, shortly after he began at the VA he was offered a regular commission in the Army which he readily accepted. He was once again assigned to Fort Bragg and the 82nd Airborne Division. John remained in the U.S., stationed at Fort Bragg, Fort Benning, West Point and Fort Leavenworth until September 1952. John, now a Lieutenant Colonel, was assigned to United States Forces, Austria in 1952. He remained in Austria until 1955. In that year he attended the Armed Forces Staff College in Norfolk, VA., a service school. In February 1956, he was assigned as Personnel Officer for the new Pentomic Division located in Fort Campbell, KY. In 1958, John was assigned to an unaccompanied tour to Korea where he was a Plans and Policy Officer in the United Nations Command. After one year in Korea, he was transferred to Washington, D.C. and was assigned to the Office of the Secretary of the Army. After three years working at the Pentagon, John, now a full colonel, was offered command of an airborne battle group within the 82nd Airborne Division at Fort Bragg. After one year of command, the Army assigned him to Naples, Italy. Naples was the site of Allied Forces Southern Europe, a subordinate headquarters of NATO. Colonel Lekson made a unique contribution here by planning and organizing the first Southern Region Conference which brought together Chiefs of the Defense Staffs of several countries and principal NATO Commanders. For his efforts in Naples, John was awarded a Legion of Merit Medal. Orders were received in July 1966 to report to US Army Infantry Center at Fort Benning where he was appointed Deputy Assistant Commandant of the Infantry School. In June 1967, John was selected for promotion to Brigadier General. With this selection came a request from Commanding General William Westmoreland for Lekson's assignment to Vietnam.

General Lekson arrived in Viet Nam, near Long Binh in May 1967. He was assigned to supervise two brigades in a joint Army-Navy project. A military citation stated as follows: "Among the operations directed by General Lekson were Coronados I to IV which was a combined operation of US Forces and Vietnamese Marines and involved riverine movement, an entirely new concept. Working long, arduous hours, General Lekson involved himself fully in the operation and he exposed himself to intense hostile fire in order to evacuate wounded personnel."

In Viet Nam, General Lekson was awarded medals for bravery in action. Among these medals, was the Silver Star Medal for directing his troops during a vicious mortar attack; two Distinguished Service Medals, and an Air Medal with "V" device. Also, while serving as Assistant Division Commander, 9th Infantry Division near Long Binh, he was awarded a Bronze Star (second oak leaf cluster) for outstanding achievement from May 1967 to September 1967.

General Lekson returned to the U.S. in October 1968 to command the Army Training Center at Fort Campbell, KY. This training center received about 500 inductees weekly as they prepared for combat in Viet Nam. In March 1970, Brigadier John Lekson was selected for promotion to Major General. At that time he and Gladys were transferred to the Republic of Korea to command the Joint Military Assistance Advisory Group. He remained there two and a half years. He returned to the U.S. and was assigned as Director of Operations, U.S. Readiness Command at MacDill Air Force Base near Tampa Bay, FL. He served in this capacity nearly three years. After a long and very distinguished 34 years in the military, Major General John Lekson retired.

In civilian life he served in many organizations, conducted and spoke at events recognizing Viet Nam POW/MIA's, veterans' ceremonies and dedications. He served on the National Advisory Committee for the Association of the U.S. Army as Region Vice President for New Mexico. He and his wife continued their close association with the Army and military community for many years.

General Lekson died in Albuquerque, NM in January 1992 at the age of 74. He quite obviously was a lifelong patriot and a very proud American of Slovenian heritage. He is buried in Arlington Cemetery.