

“Me mother was a mermaid. Me father was King Neptune. I was born on the crest of a wave, and rocked in the cradle of the deep.” -- U.S. Naval Academy Reef Points

Commander Richard William Johnson, USNA '74, was born March 22, 1952 to William and Elizabeth Johnson of Newton, Massachusetts. Rich died from liver cancer October 21, 2025. Sarah Fearn Johnson, his wife of 49 years, was by his side.

He proudly defined much of his life by his long and distinguished service in the US Navy, by his successful marriage to his wife, and by the accomplishments of his four children and seven grandchildren. He loved aircraft carriers, fighter jets, golf, and smoking cigars. A man of many layers, his guiding principle was to do his duty, in whatever capacity was required, which he said simplified his life. While he would be the first to admit he was far from perfect, he was capable of incredible generosity of his time and talents.

He will be greatly missed.

Rich grew up in the Boston suburb of Newton Lower Falls. His father was a police officer and his mother was a secretary. While his childhood home life wasn't quite a Norman Rockwell picture, he did speak fondly of his time in Massachusetts. He spent many years in Scouts and was proud of becoming an Eagle Scout. He was a lineman on two state championship teams at Newton High School as a football player. Richard's two younger brothers, Paul Johnson of West Palm Beach, Florida, and Neil Johnson of Durango, Colorado, have many tales of Richard's exploits. Richard talked about summers on Cape Cod, with his brothers and cousins, Maureen Edgecomb and Steve Murphy. Richard fondly remembered fishing in the Charles River near his dad's police station and always getting home late to the house on Grove Street.

After graduating from Newton High at 18 years old, Richard left Boston and went to college at the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland. Choosing the “Boat School” over several other choices proved to be the most impactful choice of his life. Initially, he went to Navy to play football, but too few hours studying and too many demerits meant he had to give up football or give up a career. He chose to drop football and focus on having that career. Getting a bit more serious about school, after his having met Sarah, Richard graduated June, 1974 and commissioned into the life of a professional military man. This provided him with direction and with an immense sense of purpose.

For the next 22 years, Richard served in the US Navy as a Naval Flight Officer. His career spanned visits to six continents, with several duty stations in Virginia. His growing family and he spent three quality years in Annapolis, where he was the 3rd Company Officer at the Naval Academy. They had shorter stays in Yokosuka, Japan and Pensacola, Florida. Richard was top graduate at Top Gun. His call sign was Sweat. He loved being part of a squadron of fighter pilots. As a Radar Intercept Officer, he was a Tomcatter in VFA-31 on USS Saratoga, CV 60. After two different mid-flight ejections and stint as a flight school instructor, Richard and Sarah were stationed officially in Norfolk, Virginia, but chose to live off-base in sleepy Grafton. While stationed for ten continuous years in Norfolk, Richard served on USS Theodore Roosevelt, CVN 71 twice. While a plank owner (part of the commissioning crew) on TR, he filled the role of Handler. During the second tour on TR, he was Mini Boss and finally Air Boss, which is the most important job on the flight deck.

After a long career aboard carriers, Richard went to work as a civilian, building carriers for Newport News Shipbuilding. His 20+ years at Newport News saw him work on the critical interface between carrier-capable fixed wing aircraft and the catapult launching system. Richard's knowledge of aircraft carriers spanned four classes of carriers, making him one of the world's foremost experts on jet launching and recovery at sea. He would have joked that because he had taken off from a carrier two more times than he ever landed, that made him an expert.

On many occasions, Richard said that if his children, Tim, Marty, Greg, and Maura, ever grew to be good adults, it wasn't his doing. It was all credit to his steadfast wife, Sarah. Rich met Sarah in an officers' club near D.C. while he was at the Naval Academy and she was studying at Walter Reed Army Institute of Nursing. Sarah was commissioned as an Army Nurse. For Rich, it was love at first sight. Though Sarah turned down his initial marriage proposal made 10 days after they met, Richard was intent on marrying her. They eventually tied the knot on October 9, 1976, on Governor's Island in New York City.

They raised their four children as best as they could and adored each of their seven grandchildren. Much to their credit, Rich and Sarah were both serious when they pledged "til death do us part." Richard made Sarah laugh like no one could. Even though Rich had lots of military buddies, plenty of golf partners, and lifelong companions, Sarah was Richard's best friend.

A funeral service will be held at 11 AM, on Friday, October 31, at St Joan of Arc Catholic Church in Yorktown, Virginia.

Eternal Father, strong to save,
whose arm hath bound the restless wave,
who bids the mighty ocean deep,
its own appointed limits keep.
Oh hear us when we cry to thee,
for those in peril on the sea.

-The Navy Hymn, William Whiting
