

John Harold Lefebber



John Harold Lefebber's life has been defined by two great loves: his devotion to a family he sometimes had to leave for long months at sea, and his passion for the Green Bay Packers. He can talk animatedly for hours about the Packers, or about politics (he's outspokenly conservative) or history (World War II, especially naval), but he keeps his deepest feelings under wraps. Only his closest friends know that his mother's early death forced him to give up his first ambition, which was to be a priest. He was born on July 9, 1943, the son of a tenant farmer in the dairy cow country of Wisconsin, a few miles from Fond du Lac. His parents, Elmer and Margaret Lefebber, devout Catholics, would go on to have 8 more children: Janet, Roger, David, George, Michael, Eleanor, Norman and Joan. Margaret Lefebber died soon after giving birth to the ninth child, a little girl who lived so briefly that she was buried in her mother's arms. John had already left home and was studying for the priesthood, but returned home to help care for his younger siblings. He has always strived to keep his mother's memory alive for them. He never complained later, though it was clear that his ambitions were bigger than the farm.

When he did leave home for good, it was to join the Navy. He spent 21 years in the military, eventually rising to the rank of Chief Petty Officer. It was while he was stationed in Bainbridge, MD, that he became close friends with a fellow corpsman, a Navy dental technician named Champ Ray. Champ was married—and he had an idea that his wife's sister, June, might be someone John would like to meet. She was. They were married in 1967, and embarked on the peripatetic life of a military family while raising three daughters: Michele, Melissa Lynn and Pamela. In those years, he was sometimes at sea, but more often was based on land, with a specialty in human resources and management. He loved to travel, but what he enjoyed most was the chance to teach people the basic tools of being a good manager. He schooled his daughters in their catechism lessons before their First Communion; years later, he showed Lynn the right way to run a fast-food restaurant. He was a natural teacher. John retired from the Navy in the early 1980s and settled in June's native North Carolina. After the Navy, he worked at a variety of jobs, including a 10-year stretch as a manager at Hardee's. He developed an interest in genealogy, and enjoyed the tedious paper research that was required before the Internet came along. Although he had accumulated various college credits over the years, he had never finished his degree. In retirement, with time on his hands, he went back to school and graduated in 1990 from Gardner-Webb College with a degree in business, an accomplishment he was quietly proud of. He stayed in close touch with his siblings in Wisconsin; he pursued his stamp collecting hobby; he toured Stonehenge and the beaches at Normandy with June; he read books on naval history. (Sooner or later, each of his daughters was required to watch "Victory at Sea" with him, whether they wanted to or not.) He held every office there was to hold in the local Knights of Columbus, and attended mass every Sunday. After being stationed in Memphis, he developed an enthusiasm for Elvis Presley—touring Graceland, collecting all of Presley's records and films, and every book written about the musical icon.

His love for the Green Bay Packers has endured through it all. In January 2017, he crossed an item off his bucket list when he traveled to Atlanta with family, including his grandson, John Robert, in hopes of seeing Green Bay win a spot in the Super Bowl. It was a barnburner of a game, though the final score was disappointing: Atlanta Falcons 44, Green Bay Packers 21. John greeted the outcome with characteristic understatement. "They could have played a little better," he said.