

# Twice wounded, he shows a GI's mettle

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** In recognition of the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II, Lawrence Township Memorial Committee, in cooperation with the Ledger, will feature a column each week during the anniversary year profiling a Lawrence resident.

"In all of the far-flung operations of our own armed forces, the toughest job has been performed by the average, easy-going, young American who carries the weight of battle on his own shoulders. It is to him that we and all future generations of American who carries the weight of battle on his own shoulders. It is to him that we and all future generations of Americans must pay grateful tribute."

These words, spoken by President Franklin D. Roosevelt during World War II, might very well have been meant for John A. Wertowitch, who exemplifies the millions of other young soldiers, sailors and marines that answered the call when their country needed them the most.

Born in Lower Manhattan, New York, on July 30, 1925, John's father died when he was nine years old, making it doubly difficult for his mother and seven sisters during those Depression years of the 1930s. Forced to leave school at an early age and obtain working papers, John was the sole support of his family. When he became of age, he was inducted into the Army on Oct. 4, 1943. Although he could have obtained a deferment because of his dependent family, he felt it was his obligation to serve his country instead. After his induction he sent home almost all of his scant military pay each month to continue their support.

## VETERAN PROFILE

### Nicholas Loveless

Following basic training at Ft. McClellan, Ala., John was given a short leave at home before reporting to Ft. Meade, Md., but it was not long before he was on a troop ship bound for England.

As a rifleman in Company C, 175th Infantry Regiment of the 29th Infantry Division, he received additional combat training for what was soon to be the D-Day invasion. The "Blue and the Gray" Division was a National Guard organization made up of men from Virginia and Maryland, and sailed for England in September, 1942. They would be chosen to spearhead the Normandy invasion because they had received 20 months of amphibious training in England and were better qualified for it.

"I was one of the first replacements

to go into Omaha Beach a few days after D-Day," John recalled. "We were told to cut our hair short and darken our zippers and whatever else was shiny, and to use the buddy system of keeping in touch with our rifle squad. We ran into action within a few days as the Germans were counter-attacking. It was slow going in that hedgerow country, and our tanks had trouble getting over the high hedgerows. After St. Lo was shelled and bombed, our division was the first to go in. The other divisions headed east toward Paris after the breakthrough, but the 29th went west to cut off the Germans attacked us.



At 18 and the sole support of his family after his father's death, John Wertowitch felt it was his obligation to join the armed forces, sending home almost all of his military pay while fighting in the European Theater during World War II.

They forced a group of French civilians ahead of them, and we couldn't shoot for fear of hitting them. An artillery shell burst in a hedgerow near me and I was hit in the face and left leg by shrapnel and covered with blood. I made my way back to an aid station and was treated, but they didn't remove the shrapnel, I still am carrying it around."

His wounds did not keep John out of action for long, and he was soon back with his company. Another close call at Brest occurred when a sniper bullet tore through his shirt and sweater adding to his combat experience. Brest was finally taken but it had been a bitter and costly fight to the 29th, which then raced eastward toward Germany.

"We passed through Chateau Thierry, where there were old World War I trenches," John went on, "and at one point took some prisoners. I was marching a group of them to the rear when one yelled, 'Achtung, Minen,' and I knew we were in a minefield. I made them go first, and they took us through OK. We continued on to Aachen and were outside Cologne in November, crossing an open field when the Germans opened up with machine guns and pinned us down. The bullets were flying all around when I saw my left ring finger flying up in the air, and blood gush out of the stump. The GI next to me was also wounded. I took out sulfa powder and swallowed some tablets and tried to stop the bleeding. After it got dark I made my way back to the rear and was treated at an aid station. While I was lying out there, my best

friend moved next to me and said, 'OK kid, take care of yourself.' He moved forward and it was the last time I saw him. I later learned he was missing in action and later declared killed. I had been his assistant on our two-man Browning Automatic Rifle team, and we were very close."

Although his wound was not life-threatening, it was troublesome, and John was sent back to England for hospital treatment. It would be several months before he would return to his company, in the meantime the Battle of the Bulge began as the Germans caught the Allies off guard in a major offensive that resulted in the biggest battle on the western front during the war. Although the 29th was not directly involved, they did keep large numbers of the enemy tied up along the Roer River.

"When I returned to my company," John continued, "the quartermaster truck driver took me within 20 miles of the front and refused to go any further, so I had to find my own way. The outfit was near Frankfort then, and I stayed with them for the rest of the war. We were at the Elbe River in May when peace was declared. I stayed on with the military government after that and came back to the U. S. with the 12th Armored Division".

John's 20 months overseas earned him the Combat Infantry Badge, the

Africa-Europe-Middle East Campaign Medal with four bronze stars, the Purple Heart with one oak leaf cluster and World War Two Victory Medal.

His division had also earned the Presidential Unit Citation.

On Dec. 9, 1945, he was discharged at Ft. Dix and returned to his home in New York. As a driver for the Fifth Avenue Coach Company, he operated a bus until 1977 when he took a position with Dow Jones as a chauffeur and security guard, retiring once again in 1991.

He is a life member of the Veterans of Foreign Wars Post in Garden City Park, Long Island, where he lived for many years, and a member of the 29th Division Association. A relatively new resident of Lawrence, he moved to 81 Sycamore Court in 1991. He and his wife Lillian, who were married in 1947, have three daughters, Carol Jacomo of Lawrence, Lorraine Wageman of Princeton and Marie Mahoney of Staten Island. They also have three grandchildren.

John's favorite hobby is tinkering and repairing household appliances and items that are broken or do not work properly, and his family relies on him to keep everything operating in their homes.

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## Veteran

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His real interest, however, is his very close relationship with his family. Having lost his father as a child, he has tried over the years to appreciate the rewards of close family ties, and has dedicated his life to them to make up for what he lacked as a child. The love, respect and admiration his family has for him is ample proof that he has more than accomplished his goals.

*The Veterans Memorial Committee is asking veterans from World War II and other conflicts to provide a photograph in uniform, along with their name, present address, branch of service and unit, where and when they served, their principal assignment and summary of their service. Their individual experiences or unusual stories are also welcomed. All photographs will be returned. Families of deceased veterans are also encouraged to submit articles. All ma-*

*terials should be sent to The Lawrence Township Veterans Memorial Committee, P.O. Box 55966, Trenton, N.J. 08638. Inquires may be made by calling 882-9108.*



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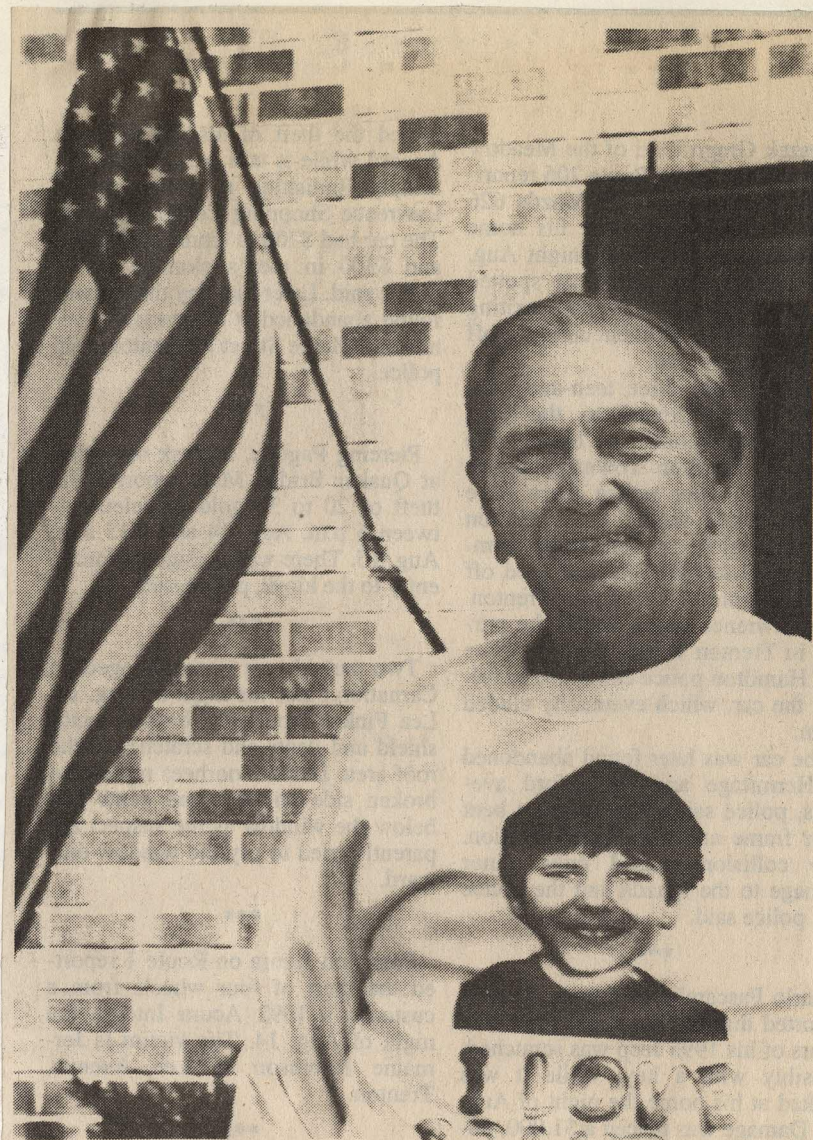
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The Lawrence Ledger

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Staff photo by Holly Marvin

In retirement, John Wertwitch is working hard to reap the rewards of close family ties, something he missed when he lost his father at an early age and then went off to war at 18.