

Delivering the goods for Patton's army

Amid the battle for freedom, many signs of discrimination

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.

On Sept. 14, 1944 — D-Day plus 100 — Gens. Hodges and Patton had reached a battle line in France that Operation Overlord planners did not expect to reach before May, 1945. They were halted by a critical shortage of supplies that were piling high on the docks at Cherbourg. Not only gasoline and ammunition, but a wide range of essentials were needed if the Allies' infantry and armor were to continue their thrust deep into German-occupied territory. It was John Harley and the men of the Red Ball Express that came to the rescue.

John C. Harley was born on July 4, 1922 in Dillon, S.C., and later came to Trenton with his parents. He returned to the South to live with his grandmother when his mother died in 1926, but came back to Trenton in 1935. He attended Trenton public schools, and concealing his age, joined the N.J. National Guard in 1937.

Company D was a Trenton unit and part of the First Separate Battalion, an all-black infantry company, which in 1940 became part of the 372nd Infantry Regiment, also made up of African-Americans. The 372nd had its beginnings in the Civil War, later campaigned in Puerto Rico in the Spanish-American War, and served with distinction in Alsace-Lorraine and the Meuse-Argonne in World War I. Their summer encampments were at Sea Girt and they were the recipients of many combat, rifle and

athletic trophies.

As the war clouds gathered in Europe, Mr. Harley and his regiment were mustered into federal service on March 10, 1941 at Fort Dix, and assigned to security and guard duty in the New York metropolitan area.

"One of my worst experiences," Mr. Harley said, "was when a ship blew up at Pier 69 in New York harbor. I think it was the Normandy and people thought it was sabotaged.

"I was put on guard duty directly underneath the Brooklyn Bridge for a two-hour tour, but they forgot I was there and I stayed without relief for 22 hours in the snow and sleet in 15 below zero weather. When someone finally remembered I was still there and they came to relieve me, I was half-frozen and they couldn't pry my rifle loose from my arm. They took me to the hospital and it was a long time before I finally recovered," he said.

"From there I was transferred to the 731st Military Police Battalion at Camp Upton, then to Camp Williams, Utah, and March Field, Calif., where I was in charge of a detail of 18 men on duty at the Hollywood Canteen and the motion picture studios. We had to look sharp there, and always wore a helmet, gloves and leggings. We got to see a lot of the stars and the 18 months I spent there were the best of my service career."

Early in 1944, John was on an overseas shipment to Liverpool, England, and transferred to the 4127th Trucking Company as a line sergeant attached to Gen. Patton's Third Army. They became known as the "Red Ball Express," named after the express delivery service of railroads in the United States, and were given

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Nicholas Loveless

the responsibility of transporting badly needed ammunition, gasoline, communication equipment, vehicle parts, clothing and rations from the Cherbourg docks to the front lines. Massive amounts of supplies were needed every day as Gen. Patton pushed his troops to the limit.

"I landed at Omaha Beach on D-Day plus four," Mr. Harley contin-

ues, "and we were still under fire. After the breakthrough at St. Lo, we were rolling around the clock from St. Lo right up to the front lines. After Chartres was taken we had a one-way system of highways mapped out and only Red Ball trucks were allowed on those roads. I was in charge of a squad and always carried a .30-calibre carbine and .45 Colt pistol — and we never knew when we would have to use them.

"The speed limit on the roads was 25, but we rarely held it at 25 unless traffic got heavy. Most of the time we were overloaded by as much as 100 percent of regulations. We were always short of spare parts, especially tires, and if a truck broke down or was blown up, it was just pushed aside out of the way so it didn't delay others. There were a lot of accidents, especially at night when we drove with black-out lights — 'cat eyes' we called them.

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