

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

VETERAN PROFILE

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-

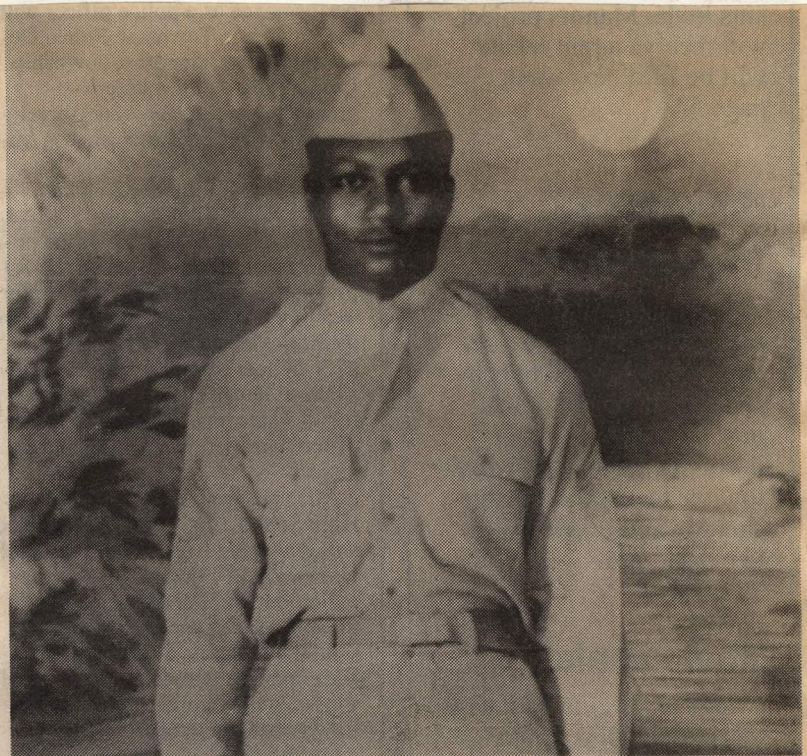
ues, "and we were still under fire. After the breakthrough at St. Lo, we were rolling around the clock from St. Lo right up to the front lines. After Chartres was taken we had a one-way system of highways mapped out and only Red Ball trucks were allowed on those roads. I was in charge of a squad and 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.

The Lawrence Ledger

June

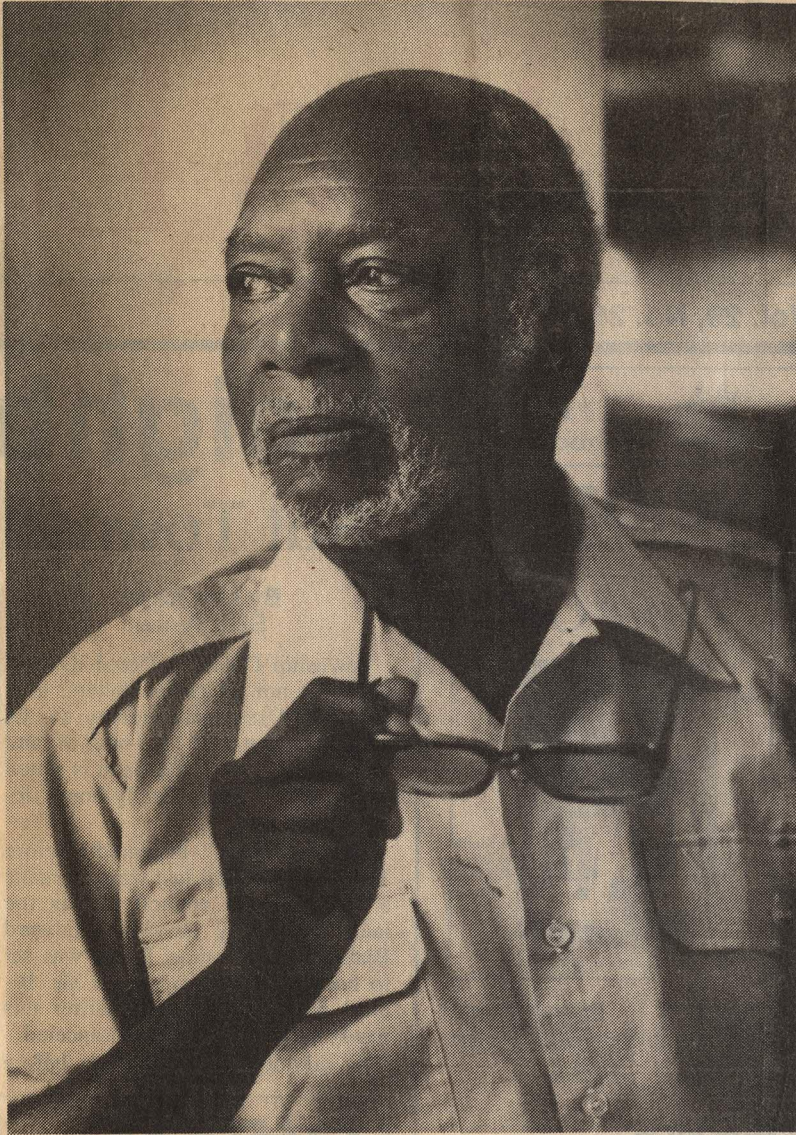
Thursday, ~~May~~ 29, 1995



John Harely in a studio photo taken in Hollywood, Calif. in 1943.

"When the Battle of the Bulge began in December 1944," he continued, "there was a shortage of infantry riflemen and a call went out for volunteers. I had all that training and volunteered to go. They were mixing one black and one white soldier to make up the companies, and we were supposed to go to England for training, but went right to the front lines instead. By the end of January, the Bulge battle was over and we were all transferred back to our own units again."

Mr. Harley continued to supply the Third Army through Belgium, Luxembourg, across the Rhine at Aachen, and all the way to Berlin. When the war ended he had amassed an outstanding 175 points, and only 85 were needed for discharge. Having been in the army since 1940, he de-



Staff photo by Mark Czajkowski

John Harley looks back to his World War II days when he was part of the Red Ball Express as the allies closed in on Hitler's Germany.

cided he had enough and was discharged on Nov. 19, 1945, settling in the Eggerts Crossing section of Lawrence Township with his father.

In 1947, Mr. Harley married Mae Vereen and in 1955 the couple moved to their current home at 101 Altamawr Ave. The Harleys have five children: John Jr., an Air Force veteran of Vietnam; Brynne Yvette; Barbara; Ellen; and Jeffrey, a member of the N.J. National Guard. They also have six grandchildren.

Mr. Harley is a member of American Legion Post 1000, a trustee of the New Salem Baptist Church King David No. 15 P-H-A, past president of the Pilgrim's Association of the Masonic Lodge, and active with the Khufu Temple in Princeton. After his

discharge from the Army he worked at various jobs, and retired from the N.J. Department of Transportation in 1987 after 25 years service as a heavy equipment operator.

Recovering from recent heart surgery, this soft-spoken, mild-mannered veteran of some of the bloodiest campaigns in Europe is proud of his military service. Yet, as a black soldier, there were many occasions when he experienced the bitterness of prejudice and discrimination from townspeople near his stations, and worse, from his white counterparts in the Army and from the Army itself.

There were many times when disputes erupted in fights, and it was

See **VETERAN**, Page 3A

The Lawrence Ledger

June
Thursday, May 29, 1995

Veteran

Continued from Page 2A

usually the black soldiers that would take the brunt of punishment from the Army, Mr. Harley recalled. Many high-ranking military leaders did not want to give African-Americans the chance to prove themselves and most were assigned to non-combat service positions. When given the opportunity, however, they seized it and proved their fighting ability as evidenced by the 555th Parachute Infantry, the 92nd Infantry in Italy, the 93rd Infantry in the South Pacific, the Tuskegee Airmen of the 332nd Fighter Group in Italy, the 761st Tank Battalion — which Gen. Patton specifically requested — the 969th Field Artillery — which won the Distinguished Unit Citation at Bastogne — and many others.

To that long list we add the name of Sgt. John C. Harley, who dedicated six years of his life in the service of his country.

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 un-

usual stories are also welcomed. All photographs will be returned. Families of deceased veterans are also encouraged to submit articles. All materials 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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