

# Welterweight boxer became Navy mechanic

*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.*

When Charley Toleno enlisted in the U.S. Navy early in 1942 he thought that his other brothers might be spared military duty. The Toleno family lived on Bond Street in Trenton at that time, and shortly after Charley was inducted, his four brothers followed.

Frank took part in the invasion of the Philippines and was killed by an enemy sniper. Joseph landed at Normandy on D-Day and was severely injured by a land mine. Nicholas was a crew member of an Army tank in France and Germany, and Dominick was a sailor aboard the aircraft carrier USS Block Island when it was sunk by torpedoes from the German submarine U-549 on May 29, 1944, 300 miles southwest of the Madeira Islands in the Atlantic Ocean. He was one of 951 survivors and spent 10 hours in the water before being rescued. Charley saw action in the Pacific for almost three years, taking part in the invasions of Kwajalein, Eniwetok, Saipan, Tinian and Guam.

Charles R. Toleno Sr. was born in Trenton on May 22, 1921, attended public schools and graduated from Trenton high school. In 1939 he joined the N.J. National Guard and served with the 119th Medical Regiment at the Trenton Armory.

His brother Nick operated a garage and Charley developed an interest in auto mechanics at an early age by working there. He also became interested in boxing, and soon found him-

## VETERAN PROFILE

Nicholas Loveless

self in the ring of the Trenton arena as a welterweight in the heyday of the Golden Gloves boxing matches.

"Pete White was my manager," Charley began, "and he was a good manager and a good boxer. I tipped the scales at 147 at that time and was in good shape. We trained at different gyms around Trenton, but most of the time it was at Levy's Gym. I had eight fights in Trenton, Boston, Cleveland and Chicago before I went into the service, and eight more in the Navy after that. I only lost one of those fights, and that was in Saipan, and I was never knocked out.

"I knew all the oldtime fighters around Trenton, including Ike Williams, and learned a lot from Ike. It was too bad that he ended up down and out. After I was discharged from the Navy I thought about continuing boxing, but was married by that time and decided against it. I've always been a boxing fan over the years."

His background in mechanics convinced the Navy to send Charley to diesel mechanic school, and upon completion he was assigned to the USS Phaon ARB-3, an advanced repair base ship. He quickly rose from apprentice seaman to motor machinist mate first class because of his knowledge of motors and engines, and eventually was placed in charge of the Phaon's engine room.

In November 1943, the Gilbert Islands of Makin and Tarawa were taken by the Marines and Army, and the next objective was to be the Marshalls in the island-hopping campaign of the Central Pacific. Charley's ship was in the invasion fleet at Kwajalein, the world's largest atoll, on Feb. 1, 1944, and again at Eniwetok Atoll on the far end of the island



Charley Toleno after enlisting in the U.S. Navy during World War II.

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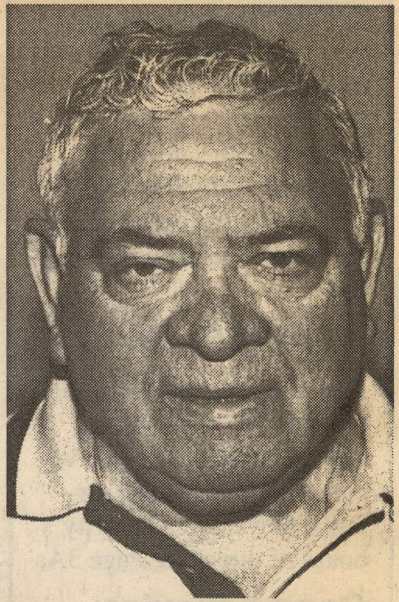
"Our ship was equipped to fix almost anything," Charley continued. "We repaired ship's engines, electrical motors, bulkhead fittings, battle damage and any and all types of repairs. We were a floating garage and repair shop. On all the invasions we went right in with the invasion forces and made on-the-spot repairs to damaged and disabled ships; that way they could go right back in action.

"That also made us a prime target for the Japanese planes, and we would have to take evasive action to avoid them. We had a number of close calls when their bombers dropped bombs close enough to rock our ship. We never ran out of work and were busy all the time. My job was in the engine room and I couldn't see a lot of what was going on the surface.

"After Eniwetok our next invasion was at Saipan in June. A few days before the invasion we were somewhere near it, and one by one ships appeared on the horizon and began assembling until there were hundreds of ships gathered for the invasion force. Every night, all night long, our naval guns and planes were shelling and bombing the coast, and it was a spectacular sight to see the big balls of fire from the guns and the explosions all along the shoreline of the island."

The losses among the landing parties at Tarawa and Makin in the Gilbert Islands had been a bitter lesson, as the pre-invasion bombardment had not been hard enough or long enough, and the enemy fought savagely to repel the landings. This time, however, they were hit with every available bomb and shell to pave the way for the landing parties. Even so, the Japanese defenders resisted so fiercely it took three weeks to secure Saipan. In the meantime, the USS Phaon took a hit from a Japanese plane.

"We were laying off the coast," Charley explained, "When a general quarters alarm sounded. My G.Q. station was in the engine room so I couldn't tell what was happening on deck, but a Japanese plane got close enough to drop a bomb that hit one of



Staff photo by Joe Hazen

Lawrence resident Charley Toleno today.

our gun positions and penetrate below the water line. Water started to flood the engine room, and I picked up the phone and gave a damage report.

"We were still moving and taking evasive action, and the ship began to tilt to one side until we could transfer ballast to get us back on an even keel. We managed to repair the damage using large sheets of metal, and after repairing so many other ships, we finally had to work on our own to keep it from sinking.

"All five of the gun crew were killed when the bomb hit; they never had a chance. A few days later they were buried at sea. It was a sad ceremony and I'll never forget those body bags draped in American flags, and watching them slide into the sea."

The Phaon then moved on with the invasion fleet to Tinian, and then Guam, after which Charley was given R&R leave back to the states. He returned again to the Pacific, this time to the Philippine Islands, where

See **VETERAN**, Page 3A

# Veteran

Continued from Page 2A

he was assigned shore duty, much to his dismay. After almost three years in the Pacific, Charley returned home for discharge in October 1945.

In 1946, he and his wife, the former Katherine Klein, moved to Lawn park Avenue in Lawrence, where he still resides. After 51 years of marriage, Katherine passed away two year ago. There are two surviving sons, Frank and Charles Jr., in addition to five grandchildren.

Following his discharge, Charley turned down an opportunity to join the Lawrence Police Department, and opted to purchase a tavern in Jamesburg. He later owned the C & J Bar in East Trenton, and finally Charley's Bar at Beatty and Deklyn Avenue. He retired in 1984 and sold the bar, but found he could not take the inactivity, and acquired a delicatessen for several years.

His hobbies always have been hunting and fishing, which he still enjoys, and he is a spectator of all sports, but most of all boxing. He is a member of the Baron A.A. and Elks Lodge 2412 of Lawrence; president of the Bond Athletic Association; and an active member of American Legion Post 414, where he has served as bar chairman for the past five years.

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The combined military service of the Toleno family in World War II is outstanding, and there are very few in the area that are equal to it. Charley Toleno once thought that by joining the Navy his brothers might not be required to go, but all five brothers recognized their country's need very early in World War II and unselfishly gave everything they had in its defense.

*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 also are welcomed. All photographs will be returned. Families of deceased veterans also are encouraged to submit articles. All materials should be sent to The Lawrence Township Veterans Memorial Committee, P.O. Box 55966, Trenton, N.J. 08638. Inquiries may be made by calling 882-9108.*

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