



Driving on the Edge of Death: Arthur Joseph Jr. and the Red Ball Express

Interview by Isaac Hampton II

Arthur Joseph Jr. was born in Tyler, Louisiana, on December 6, 1918. As a small boy he moved with his family to Galveston, where he grew up and attended Central High School. In October 1941, he volunteered for the United States Army. During the war, he served in the 3384 Truck Company, which helped keep American troops supplied as they drove into Germany after D-Day. His memories are taken from an interview on February 8, 2005, with Isaac Hampton, as well as from *Driving on the Edge of Death: Supplying the Armies of the United States (1st, 3rd, and 7th Armies)*, his published account of his experiences in World War II.¹

The Red Ball Express was part of the Army Transportation Corps that supplied American forces in Europe after the D-Day invasion of June 6, 1944. The term "Red Ball" was a common railway phrase in the 1940s that meant express mail. The Red Ball Express was officially established thirty-six hours after the D-Day invasion to alleviate supply problems. Its drivers hauled over 412,000 tons of supplies to American combat zones facing German air attacks, snipers, and land mines. Their legendary around-the-clock operations supported the rapid movement of U.S. ground forces. Perhaps the best example of this is when the Red Ball supplied Patton's Third Army and the First Army as they raced across France.²

The Red Ball Express is cemented in American military folklore because its soldiers were predominately African American. Of the 23,000 soldiers who served in the Red Ball Express, approximately seventy-five percent were African American. According to a *Time* magazine article from 1944, the Red Ball symbolized Americans "as a nation of builders and movers."³

African American soldiers during World War II fought on two fronts, one against America's foreign enemies and another to secure civil rights and desegregation at home. Despite discrimination against them in a segregated army, African American soldiers still displayed patriotism and allegiance to a nation that considered them second-class citizens. Their courage under fire and sacrifice helped win World War II while also preparing the way for the Civil Rights Movement in the U.S. after the war. Their service and their stories must not be forgotten.

"I volunteered back in 1941. I was only making \$8 a week and it was hard to make a living on that kind of money. So, I decided to go into the military. They were paying me \$21 a month and \$50 a month to my wife. I had no clothes to buy. Everything was taken care of as far as I was concerned. We were all going to be soldiers because soldiers looked so good and I always wanted to be one of those guards. We were all glad to go because it was a place of safe haven. We had a place to eat and a place to sleep and our wives were taken care of. So I went.

My basic training started off at Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio, Texas. We had an infiltration course. That is where they fire live ammunition over your head. After we completed that, they sent us to Cheyenne, Wyoming, where they organized a truck company. Most of us could not drive a truck. I could not drive one too well myself but I learned pretty quick to drive.



Elder Arthur Joseph's home is filled with memorabilia from the war.

We only had three rifles in the whole company. They were for the company commander, his lieutenant, and the first sergeant. The rest of us had wooden guns like we played with in grade school. That is all we had. Every morning, they would get us up around three or four o'clock in the morning with our wooden rifles. I don't know why they were doing this. I don't know if the white soldiers had guns or not, but we had no guns. We had no ammunition.

All the sergeants were black. We had a white company commander. Our first sergeant was black. We got excellent training. If we had not received excellent training,

we all would have been dead. We had 114 in my unit, my company: northern boys, southern boys, mid-west, everybody.

After we left Cheyenne, Wyoming, we went to Fort Ord, California. I found out in California that it was not what it was supposed to be. They had many places that we could not go into and if we would go,

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they would not serve us. We would take a seat and the waitress would bring a glass of water and silverware, and we would sit there a couple of hours while they waited for us to get up and leave. This happened many times. I do not like California to this day because of that. They said one thing and were doing just the opposite. I came back south after the war because I understood. I knew what I could do and could not do, so I wouldn't get embarrassed. In the South, we had to go to the back door or side window. I knew that. In the end that was bad and I didn't like it. But we had to do it. But they told you in California that everybody could do what they wanted and that you were free. Not true.

We received our first black officer in California. We had a second lieutenant and that's all we had. Black officers were soldiers. They were not Uncle Toms. These men were men and we admired them. There is nothing I can say that was wrong about those men. We did not have any complaints. I couldn't say the white man was doing this and doing that. The only thing was that the problems were outside in the general public. They were the ones that gave us a hard time with their prejudice. And there was nothing the officers could do about that.

They tried to fight that type of thing, but they could not. That was just the way of California when I got there. There was a whole lot of segregation because a lot of those people came from the Deep South, learned the business and still carried rules they had back south!

I knew we were going to war, but I wanted to go to Japan. I wanted to fight the Japanese because they bombed Pearl Harbor. They tried to mislead us by issuing clothes for the South Pacific. So we thought we were going there. But it came to the point where we were going to Europe and not to the South Pacific and ended up going to Rochelle, New York to ship out.

We went to Europe on a liberty ship called, the Henry. We landed in England at Southampton. The English people were okay. But our biggest problem was that American soldiers had put out all kinds of things about men of color. They said that when the moon rises at night, our tails would come out and we would bark at the moon. And every night, there would be tons of people coming down to



our campsite and standing on our side of the barbed wire and just waiting for the show.

The English told us that the white Americans said we had tails and barked at the moon! I could not believe this type of talk. They always called us all kinds of names. I mean, that did not bother me one bit.

In preparing for D-Day, we loaded up and unloaded. Then we went back and loaded up again. They were trying to confuse the Germans to make them believe that we were going to land some place else. So, now before we got to the harbor one morning, they gave us what they called our last supper.

They had arranged to give us white sheets, breakfast, eggs, everything. All the

white officers ate together. And we said to ourselves, this must be it. This must be our last supper. And sure enough, that was our last supper. They were trying to make you feel as if we were men and not animals. I had made up my mind I was going to get killed and I was ready to die. So was everybody else. And during the invasion, there was no crying or complaining, no nothing because you knew we were going to die.

We landed on Omaha Beach two days after D-Day, on June 8, 1944. There was still heavy fighting. The 3384 Truck Co. ASCZ was in the L.S.T. (landing ship tank). The driver was at the wheel and ready to transport us. The trucks rolled off into deep water, floating. The trucks had wax over the wires to protect the motor and insure that the trucks did not stop. There was water in our two and a half ton trucks up to our necks. Everybody made it. We were well trained.⁴

We drove trucks only; we did not load them. Our greatest fear was fighter planes. Fighter planes would eat you up. They could come up from out of nowhere. We were strafed many times, always by a single plane. When the plane came, you didn't get off the highway. As long as you stayed on the highway, you were all right.

Now, the next problem we had was going through this rural town where the roads are so narrow that German sympathizers might throw something inside of the truck. Going through a small town, they would sometimes stop the lead truck or they might hit the back truck. But if they hit the front truck, that caused the trucks to stop and they could have a field day. There were also snipers.

Every truck had a fifty-caliber machine gun. We made our runs both night and day. Night was all right, but you had to drive with no lights on. No lights. You really had to know where the road was. So, night driving was a terrible job, but it was also safe because of the "cat eyes" (military driving lights). But once you used the taillight, you could be in big trouble.

We hauled everything: C-rations, ammunition, fuel. We got those guys everything that they needed. There was no slack. There was no slow up until the very last day. You worked as long as you could stand. We had some Caucasian drivers with different units. They would not drive with us. They would pick up

the supplies and bring them to us. We would then take it to the combat zone. This was not because we were more expendable. I think we had more experience. I didn't see any unnecessary prejudice at that time.

We truck drivers caught hell keeping up with every order and trying to deliver supplies as fast as a road could be cleared.... Some of the towns along the way were a living hell. We were shot at from ruins that were alongside the roads. We were shot at from fields. DEATH was everywhere. As far as you could look you saw burned out tanks and men lying dead on top of their tanks. Towns we passed through, like Dinant, Belgium, were totally destroyed and the dead were all over the place. Those narrow streets through town were frightful?

We received some awards for our work, but there was no official ceremony. A guy came down here one night, one early morning, called us out and gave every man in my unit a Silver Star, 2 inch badge, and 5 battle stars. I did not know what these things were. To me it had no meaning whatsoever. No one said anything about it. They gave us a little bag. I didn't realize it was something until years later.

After fighting in the war, we anticipated things being better in America. This was wishful thinking on our part however. We quickly saw that things had not changed. When we landed in Rochester, New York, the American Red Cross was giving out donuts and coffee to some.... The coffee was passed behind us or when we passed through, those serving would look the other way. Yes! We were home in America. I wondered, what did we fight this fierce war for? Did they think that I killed a German who was white like them?

The U.S. Army trained us all to do a job. Some were cooks, truck drivers, and

others were killers. I still loved my country in war, and I damn sure loved her in peace. We drove at the edge of death constantly. We expected to kill or be killed. I remained proud of our accomplishments despite the injustices I encountered when I arrived home.⁶

During the war, I met a German officer who spoke good English, and he said to me, "What are you fighting for? Are you fighting to keep your separate place?" So, what I did, I said to him, "I am fighting because my country asked me to fight. You are fighting because your country made you fight." There was nothing I could do with it. It was not the right answer. Many years later, I would have answered it another way, but that was all I was thinking back then.

And then, during that same period of time, we met what they called Senegalese black soldiers who would not associate with us because at one time our ancestors were slaves. They asked me, "Why are you here fighting to free people when you are oppressed in your own land? Why are you fighting to free your oppressors?" Well, what am I going to tell him? I know no other land. I was born here and I was raised in the United States. That is all the land I know. I do not know anything about Africa or other places. I refused to allow my mind to go in a traitor's way. My family is a military family. My

father served in World War I.

Although many in our unit were not highly educated, we didn't have mess makers. They accepted their job as a soldier. They never complained about anything. And we had no racial problems at all. The only thing they had in California was that they would not serve you in those cafés like they should. But other than that, you were just ordinary men, soldier to soldier. Although they claimed they had fights with each other, there was no racism. We proved to them that all the little petty things they were saying about us were not true. Without the military, we would have not advanced as far as we have now because we proved to them that all of those things that they said about us were not true. In every major war, we had blacks there. We might not have been wanted, but we were there.

One of the crowning events of my life was when I was a young man and a truck driver in the Red Ball Express. Driving in the Red Ball Express was a great honor. It put pride in me that we were able to go into a foreign land and deliver everything on time to men who needed supplies. We did that with no complaints whatsoever. It taught me how to protect myself and how to deal with other people. It taught me how I would act under fire. Yes, I found out that I was no coward, that I was not afraid to face death. I did not see any black men die crying or running away. These men were men."



Arthur Joseph Jr. had no desire to drive trucks after returning to the Houston area after the war. He worked briefly at a chemical plant in Texas City, and then later worked for the Post Office before taking a job in Customs from which he retired after thirty years. He then went back to college and earned a bachelor's degree at age 75. ★

Arthur Joseph and Charlene