Our American Hero

Novi man, 93, finally receives his WWII military medals

Harold Ortwine is a true slice of American history. The 93-year-old Novi resident shook hands with Henry Ford, fought heroically in one of WWII’s deadliest battles, and then waited more than 70 years before he was awarded his military medals.

He has a razor-sharp memory and lives on his own, making his own meals and mowing the grass when it gets too tall. He still has his driver’s license.

“I’m driving a Buick,” Harold said with a smile.

He was born in August 1924 in Brighton. His father, Clarence, worked at an assembly plant called Novi Equipment that built parts for Ford Motor Co. The owner of the plant, Lewis Welch, sponsored a race car that broke the track record at Indianapolis Motor Speedway.

“I saw it race a couple of times at the Indianapolis 500 in ’47 or ’48,” Harold said of the fabled race car.

His family moved to Novi in 1932. He attended a one-room schoolhouse and wanted to be an engineer. He figures there were about 3,000 people living in Novi at the time.

Harold worked at Mobil Gas Station near Grand River and Novi Road in his early teens, and right down the street was a general supply store that carried everything from horse harnesses to button top shoes.

“I was 16 or so, and old Henry Ford drove into the station,” Harold said. “His chauffer asked if he could use our hoist because Henry wanted to look underneath the car – it was all covered in lead, fenders and everything. I asked him why … these gravel roads back then, he didn’t like the stones because they’d put dents in the fenders and they made too much noise. So he covered the car in lead.”

Henry Ford also was particular about his socks.

“He’d go from the station to the store and buy a pair of socks – and he’d come over and take his shoes off right at the pump and change his socks,” Harold said. “One time I asked him, ‘How come you’re changing your socks?’ And he said, ‘I got holes in the heels and I stop here every time I come through Novi because my wife darns the socks and I hate darned socks.’ That was old Henry himself.”

IN THE ARMY

Harold had four brothers, and two of them served with him in the military.

His oldest brother, Clarence “Buck” Ortwine, was the first to join and ended up fighting in Italy during WWII. One of his younger brothers, George, fought in Korea.

Harold also fought in WWII, chasing the Nazis across Europe. In 1944, he was involved in one of the greatest battles in history – the Battle of the Bulge.

He fought with the 106th “Golden Lion” Infantry Division, and was lucky he wasn’t taken prisoner. The division was hit hard by the Nazis and lost thousands of
men in the first few days of the battle. “We lost over 60 percent of our troops, whether they were casualties or taken prisoner,” he said. “It was freezing cold, the snow was bad and we had no gloves. It was miserable.”

When Harold was released from the Army in 1945, there was a mix-up with his paperwork that indicated he served with the 104th Division, which did not serve in the same campaigns overseas. It wasn’t until U.S. Rep. Dave Trott’s office got involved recently that Harold’s family was able to have the corrections made to his military record.

“That’s when we discovered our dad never received a pair of medals he rightfully deserved,” said Harold’s youngest son, Mark. “He really just wanted to make sure his paperwork indicated that he fought with the 106th Division in Europe.”

In April, Trott presented Harold with the WWII Victory Medal and Medal of Occupation, along with an American Flag that was flown over the White House.

A GOOD LIFE

Right after the Army, Harold met a young lady by the name of Audrey at a campfire party. He was 25, and she was 18 and still finishing her senior year in high school.

A romance between the two quickly blossomed.

“My grandfather told them they couldn’t get married until she graduated high school,” Mark said.

The two married in 1947, built their own home in Novi (where Harold still lives today) and raised three children.

Harold eventually landed a job with General Motors, as a mechanic testing prototype cars. Before that, he worked a series of odd jobs. One of his jobs was delivering mail – he was the first postal carrier for the City of Novi.

“I didn’t keep the job very long because it didn’t pay much back then,” Harold said. “I drove my own car and needed chains in the winter. I drove 40 miles a day, and my route went from Haggerty to Napier.”

He has fond memories of the Walled Lake Amusement Park and the Walled Lake Casino ballroom, where Benny Goodman, Tommy Dorsey and the other big bands used to play. That era was followed by Motown acts, such as Stevie Wonder, Marvin Gaye, the Supremes and the Temptations, along with famous rock ‘n’ roll acts, including the Rolling Stones and Chuck Berry.

Even so, Novi was a much quieter place.

“Nowadays it’s hurry up and do this, hurry up and do that,” said Harold. “You go to the store and you get run over by a shopping cart … back then people did not go to restaurants. There was nothing out here. They had a bar up here but I don’t think you could get a hamburger. Nowadays they got a hamburger on every corner.”

Audrey passed away a few years ago. Photographs of her as a young bride grace the fireplace mantle. Harold said he never thought about leaving Novi, the city he has called home for over 80 years.

“This place just seemed to grow on me,” he said. “I used to travel around a lot, but I never had a desire to move. I figured this place is good enough, so why leave?”

He still keeps in touch with a few other veterans from the 106th Division. The American flag presented to him has a prominent spot in his living room. He gave up his beer, but still enjoys a bowl of Corn Flakes every morning.

His favorite colors will always be red, white and blue.