

The following article was printed in The News-Herald, of Owenton, Kentucky on May 16, 2015. Jarl Lee Harris served with the 553<sup>rd</sup> Reconnaissance Wing, 553<sup>rd</sup> Field Maintenance Squadron during the Vietnam era.

BY MARLENE BROWNING-WAINSCOTT - Owenton News-Herald Correspondent

In the small Kentucky town of Owenton, you might see a few signs around that direct you to the nearest restaurant or county attraction. It's likely no one really thinks much about who created that sign. But in Owen County, you would be in for the story of a lifetime.

May 8, 2015, marks the 70-year anniversary of V-E Day (Victory in Europe), which was the day that the Germans surrendered during World War II. A country song by Jamey Johnson, "In Color," reflects on the stories of black and white pictures and says, "You should've seen it in color."

Jarl Lee Harris is a 90-year-old sign maker that saw it in color.

D-Day in Normandy, Operation Market Garden in Holland, the Battle of the Bulge, the liberation of Jewish prisoners in Nazi concentration camps, V-E day May 8, 1945, the Korean War and the Vietnam War. Harris was in the military for over 20 years. He received a Purple Heart, Bronze Star, several medals representing the countries where he served and many additional awards and commendations from his participation in the three wars.

In World War II, Harris served as a paratrooper in the 326th Airborne Engineers, 101st Airborne Division "Screamin' Eagles" of the United States Army. Following World War II, Harris enlisted in the United States Air Force and continued with the USAF until his retirement in 1969.

Willing to Serve On May 5, 1943, Harris was drafted into World War II. "I wanted to contribute to the war effort after Pearl Harbor was bombed in 1941," Harris said. He was just 16 years old when he told the superintendent of New Liberty High School that he was going to quit school and do what he could to support the war effort. He trained to be a welder and moved to Washington, D.C. with his cousin to weld and then on to Boston to weld ships. While in Boston, Harris received his draft paper.

He returned home and reported to Fort Mitchell and from there began his training to become a paratrooper in the U.S. Army. In Dec. 1943, the 101st boarded a train and headed to Boston Harbor. The Queen Mary left out of the harbor with approximately 15,000 troops, including Harris.

From D-Day to V-E Day On June 6, 1944, D-Day, the 101st Airborne jumped from their planes into Normandy. Harris recalled, "I can remember landing near a church. We used our 'clackers' (Harris describes them as being like the little clickers you find in a box of Cracker Jacks) to find each other. We used hedgerows as protection, but they did too. I crawled so much I felt like a dog." His next jump with the 101st was in Sept. 1944 in Holland, the beginning of Operation Market Garden.

On Sept. 17, 1944, Harris was hit in the head by German artillery. “We were on the road,” he said. “You could hear them (the artillery) coming. We would hit the ground. If I had been hit anywhere else, it would have killed me, but my metal helmet took the biggest part of the impact.”

Dec. 1944 brought Harris and so many others into the Battle of the Bulge. The 101st had become surrounded by the German Army at the town of Bastogne. “It was a bad time,” Harris recalled. “We couldn’t get many supplies in because it was so cloudy. It made it impossible for the planes to come over to drop them. It was cold. We put some hay in our foxhole to make it warmer. We had heavy wool coats. They were warm, but it was still cold. The Germans wanted us to surrender, but Gen. McAuliffe told them, ‘Nuts!’” Harris chuckled and said that meant they weren’t going to surrender. “The tank general (Gen. George S. Patton) came in with the tanks and ended the battle.” After the Battle of the Bulge, members of the 101st went through Germany. “We liberated two concentration camps of Dachau,” Harris said. “I remember how hungry they were. We gave them some of our food.”

After their journey through Germany, the 101st headed toward Berchtesgaden (Hitler’s retreat, Eagle’s Nest, was in the mountains over Berchtesgaden). The war was over.

Harris’ military career did not end there. When he returned home, he finished high school so he could join the air force. In 1947, he received his pilot’s license from Clark Karsner at Karsner Air Field. “I learned to fly in an Aeronca plane. We did loops, spins and dips,” Harris recollected with a smile.

He then enlisted in the United States Air Force. During his USAF career, Harris participated in the Korean War and the Vietnam War. He trained to become a mechanic on several planes, including the B-52 bomber. Harris also trained to become a technical instructor. When asked how he felt being in the war, Harris made this remark, “Combat is something you just had to experience to understand.”



Jarl Lee Harris is a member of an elite group of individuals called veterans. He proudly served his country in three wars and has continued to honor his country through volunteering and participating in various veterans’ activities.

At 90 years old, Harris is still painting new signs for businesses and people around Owen County and is currently being interviewed for his memoirs to be published at a later date.

Harris and several other veterans will be attending Elk Creek Winery Thursday for the celebration of Veterans and the unveiling of the Eyes of Freedom Memorial and the Tailgating for Troops event Saturday, also being held at Elk Creek Winery.

Image at left shows Jarl L. Harris now 90 years old. Note 553<sup>rd</sup> Reconnaissance Wing Batcat patch.