

# Buffalo Soldier from East Liberty to be honored for service

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LIVE**

Craig Smith | Friday, April 30, 2010 12:00 p.m.

Growing up in East Liberty, the only thing George N. Charlton Jr. knew about horses was that they pulled wagons.

Drafted into the Army in 1943, he learned quickly that Uncle Sam had other uses for the animals, after he took a four-day, four-night train ride to California for training on them.

“I looked out the window and saw horses and said, ‘What have I gotten myself into?’ ... I was no country boy,” said Charlton, 87, who served as a Buffalo Soldier during World War II.

Charlton, who was in the Army Reserve for 20 years and rose to the rank of lieutenant colonel, tonight will receive an award for 33 years of exemplary service to the country from Pittsburgh’s 12th Ward leaders as part of a community forum at Kingsley Association in East Liberty.

The all-black Buffalo Soldiers were formed to escort settlers, cattle herds and railroad crews as America expanded to the West in the 1800s. They fought in the Indian Wars, the Spanish American War of 1898, World War I and WWII.

“They fought for a country where they didn’t have all the rights and freedoms that the rest of us had,” said Tim Neff, director of education and curatorial services at Soldiers & Sailors Memorial Hall and Museum in Oakland.

“That’s a key question: Why did they do that? They believed in freedom. They believed in liberty.”

The Indians gave the soldiers the “buffalo” moniker for bravery and valor. Charlton, a Westinghouse High School graduate, reluctantly came to appreciate the equestrian side of his army unit.

“That’s how I got to be bow-legged,” he said.

Charlton, a combat medic, travelled through Africa and Italy during the war. He said about 14 black soldiers from Pittsburgh became Buffalo Soldiers.

The year's worth of horse training he received in California became useless during the war. The soldiers were "dismounted" when they reached Italy.

"Some of the old sergeants, when they heard that, they cried. They had been in so long, in the cavalry," Charlton said.

After the war, he earned a bachelor's degree in business administration from the University of Pittsburgh and spent 20 years as a special agent with the Internal Revenue Service. He and his second wife, Nadine, 81, have been married 49 years.

These days he likes to go to casinos, sing in a barbershop quartet and do volunteer work.

"This is my world," he said, showing visitors the family room filled with memorabilia from his military and civilian careers. There are photographs with former mayors Pete Flaherty and Richard Caliguri. A photo of Jesse Owens has a lengthy note to Charlton and his wife.

Charlton served as director of the Pittsburgh Parking Authority from 1976-1988.

He recommends military service for anyone.

"If I had my way, everyone would serve," he said. "It made me a man."

Additional Information:

## *Buffalo Soldiers*

The Buffalo Soldiers fought in the Indian Wars, Spanish-American War of 1898, World War I and World War II. American blacks have a long history of military service, including:

**1775-1783, Revolutionary War** ∅ Approximately 5,000 blacks fought in the War of Independence.

**1812-1815, War of 1812** ∅ Though blacks were barred from service for the first two years, in the war's later years they comprised 10 percent of naval crews.

**1861-1865, Civil War** ∅ Blacks made up 12 percent (178,895 men) of the Union Army and 25 percent (30,000) of the Union Navy. Thousands more served in units as laborers.

**1866-1891, Indian Wars** ∅ The 5,000 blacks who served in the all-black 9th and 10th Cavalry and 24th and 25th Infantry Regiments constituted about 10 percent of troops who guarded the Western Frontier for a quarter-century.

**1898, Spanish-American War** ââ Four regular regiments fought in Cuba, making up about 12 percent of forces on the island. Another 2,000 served in the Navy.

**1899-1902, Philippines War** ââ In addition to the four black regular regiments, two volunteer regiments composed of blacks help wage this colonial campaign.

**1917-1918, World War I** ââ More than 200,000 black soldiers made it to France. Most were in support units. The all-black 92nd and 93rd Infantry Divisions lost 773 killed in action (1.4 percent of U.S. total) and 4,408 wounded in action.

**1941-1945, World War II** ââ About 500,000 Blacks were stationed overseas. About 10 percent of blacks were in combat units. The all-black 92nd Infantry was in Italy, and the 93rd Division was stationed in the South Pacific.

*Source: Buffalo Soldiers National Museum*