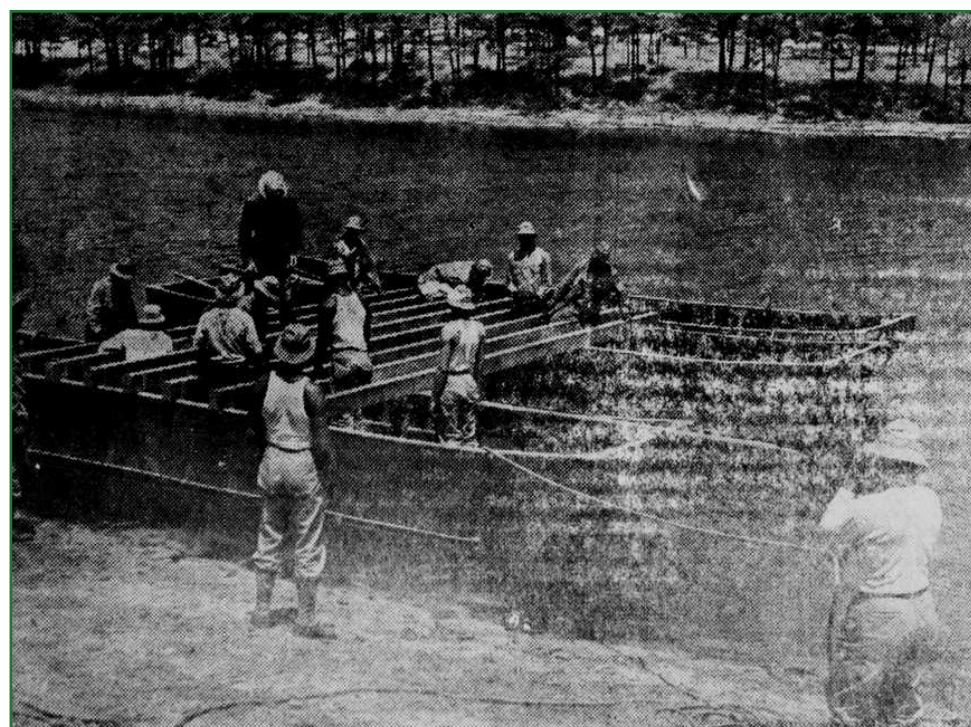


JOHN EDWARD BOSTON SERGEANT U.S. ARMY

WORLD WAR II 1910 - 1946

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The 385th Engineers construct a pontoon bridge during training at Camp Edwards, Massachusetts, in 1942. *The Echo* newspaper, Meridian, MS, 3 July 1942

John Edward Boston was born in Grafton, West Virginia, on May 15, 1910, to John Henry and Leona Boston. He was one of 14 siblings who grew up in an era of segregation on the predominantly African American west side of Grafton. Since before the Civil War, Grafton had been a major hub for the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad (B&O) on its southerly route through Clarksburg and Parkersburg—a role that only took on more importance as West Virginia's industrial potential developed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. John Henry Boston worked as a porter for the B&O, a role often relegated to Black workers at the time.

John Henry later transitioned into business as a merchant and a tailor at a downtown clothing store, though census records show that he also underwent periods of unemployment. His wife Leona, John Edward's mother, cared for the large family as a homemaker. While essential, Leona's role would not have augmented the family income in any significant way, and the Bostons were probably never financially comfortable during John Edward's childhood. Despite these challenges, it was important to John Edward's parents that he gain an education.

He was sent to Storer College in 1931, one of only three post-secondary schools in West Virginia open to Black students until racial integration was enacted in the 1950s (the other two being West Virginia Collegiate Institute, now West Virginia State University, and Bluefield Colored Institute, now Bluefield State University). Located in Harpers Ferry at the far eastern tip of West Virginia, Storer College had been established following the Civil War to educate formerly enslaved individuals. The institution gradually expanded its offerings to both secondary and post-secondary education, building a strong reputation for excellence. While Storer was several hours away from John's hometown in Grafton, regular rail service along the B&O made the distance less daunting.

During the year John attended, the school had 78 high school students. By 1932, however, John's grades had fallen, and he transferred from Storer to Kelly Miller High School in Clarksburg, the county seat of Harrison County, West Virginia. He commuted more than 20 miles to school—once again along the B&O. Kelly Miller, named for an important African American intellectual and professor at Howard University, opened in 1919 for Black students of north-central West Virginia. Like Storer, it had quickly acquired a reputation for academic rigor. It is not known whether John was able to balance work with study to graduate successfully.

After leaving school, John joined many of his older siblings working to support the family. Around 1938, he followed in his father's footsteps as a porter for the B&O Railroad, carrying passengers' luggage and earning about \$800 a year. His siblings, meanwhile, maintained other jobs as housekeepers or laborers while the Great Depression continued to make the economic lives of most Americans very difficult. Enrollment in the federal work programs of the New Deal, such as the Civilian Conservation Corps or Works Progress Administration, was usually more difficult for African Americans, which may explain why no such instances have been found in the Boston family.

However, other global crises were forcing changes upon American domestic life. By the late 1930s, the Japanese empire was fighting an aggressive war of expansion in China, and Nazi Germany's annexation of territory in Europe took a violent turn when Hitler's forces invaded Poland in September 1939. In response to these developments, President Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration began a large-scale military rearmament program and boosted funding for military expenditures across the board. The federal government instituted a peacetime draft on September 16, 1940, requiring all men from ages 18 to 64 to register for conscription. Under this policy, John registered for military service on October 26, 1940. John maintained his job as a B&O porter and was living at home when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.



The segregated barracks for African American troops at Camp Edwards. *Library of Congress*

After this sudden destruction of the U.S. Pacific Fleet at anchor in Hawaii, the United States officially entered World War II. Five months later, John Edward Boston was drafted into the army on April 17, 1942. As an African American, he was assigned to a segregated unit: Company B of the 385th Engineer Battalion. The 385th consisted of Black enlisted men commanded by White officers, a practice typical of segregated units since Blacks had first been allowed to enlist during the Civil War seven decades earlier. Even Black combat units such as World War II's famous 92nd Infantry Division, the "Buffalo Soldiers," were typically commanded by White officers. Ongoing racial prejudice, however, dictated that most Black soldiers were assigned to roles as quartermasters, truck drivers, stewards, engineers, and other "menial" jobs.

John, along with 800 other Black draftees and their White officers, assembled at Camp Edwards, near Cape Cod, Massachusetts, to begin training. Up until 1940, Camp Edwards had belonged to the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, which had been using funds from the Works Progress Administration to develop the site as a training facility for its National Guard. In an effort to expand its own training capacity, the regular Army leased the site and began adding 1,200 buildings. Up sprang living quarters, mess kitchens, and hospitals to accommodate 25,000 trainees. Separate quarters were

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established for Black units in the northern part of the camp. This is where Boston and his comrades would have stayed, despite the fact that the 385th actively contributed to the shape of Camp Edwards itself—including the construction of a new 1,700-foot-long obstacle course, complete with manmade and natural obstructions.

During the 13 weeks John and his comrades were at Camp Edwards, instructors taught them how to work on various vehicles, construct roads, build structures, assemble pontoon bridges, and ferry war materiel over bodies of water. Black newspapers at the time displayed great pride and interest in the 385th with articles and photographs tracking their progress in *The Detroit Tribune* and *The Southern News*.

After training at Camp Edwards, Boston and the 385th were moved to Camp Myles Standish in Taunton, Massachusetts. This served as the staging point for personnel embarking from the Port of Boston for the European theater. John and his comrades would have received new uniforms, equipment, and lectures regarding censorship and secrecy. Owing to the threat of U-boats, personnel were prohibited from contacting loved ones regarding where they were or when they might be leaving. They received additional immunization shots and filled out paperwork—including their wills. Once they were processed, physical training would continue while the men tried to fill their downtime awaiting orders to go overseas.

The European theater's fighting loosely spanned the European continent, the Mediterranean Sea, and portions of North Africa. By January 10, 1943, the 385th Engineers had entered the fray in Oran, Algeria, constructing vital infrastructure such as roads, hospitals, and barracks for Allied forces. John and his comrades performed these vital tasks as they chased the Allied advance to Bizerte, Tunisia.

While the battalion wasn't fighting with weapons on the front lines, modern mechanized warfare had rendered even rear echelon areas far from safe from attack. Railroads, roads, supply depots, and other infrastructure were recognized as important cogs in the machinery of 20th-century war, and targeted as such. While in Tunisia, Boston and his comrades experienced a German air raid on the campsite they were constructing, injuring personnel and damaging equipment. Despite the hazards, the 385th followed the Allied advance across the Mediterranean to Italy in September 1943. In Naples, the unit helped reconstruct damaged military buildings destroyed by retreating German forces.

By early 1945, following the successful D-Day landings in Normandy the previous year, Allied forces were advancing from Italy into southern France. John and his unit settled in at Dijon to construct supply depots, build and repair roads and airfields, and manage storage facilities. On April 2, 1945, the 385th departed Dijon and crossed the Rhine at Mannheim before occupying the city of Heidelberg with other American troops. The following month, Axis forces in Europe capitulated and by June 12, 1945, John and his unit

transferred to Rouen, France, where the 385th Engineers were inactivated on September 1.

Boston and his comrades were discharged at Camp Herbert Tareyton in Normandy on October 20, 1945. Three days later, he was on his way home aboard the *SS India Victory*, one of several hundred Victory ships mass-produced to succeed the *Liberty*-class transport ships from earlier in the war. He arrived in Boston, Massachusetts, on October 29, closing the book on two years and six months in North Africa and Europe during his military service. He was awarded the Good Conduct Medal for his excellent behavior and efficiency while serving overseas, having achieved the rank of sergeant.

Soon after leaving the military, John Boston resettled in Cumberland, Maryland, and returned to work as a porter for the B&O Railroad. He married Lillian Fischer on November 1, 1945, but their time together was cut short when John died at home of cardiac arrest on September 4, 1946, at the age of 36. After a funeral held in his Cumberland home, his remains were interred at Grafton National Cemetery on September 8, 1946. Some Boston family members remain in the Grafton area to this day, honoring John Edward's legacy of contributing to the nation's defense during the greatest conflict in human history.

TOP RIGHT: Pullman car porter T.R. Joseph in his 1930s uniform, similar to what John Boston would have worn. *Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture*

BOTTOM RIGHT: Cover of a welcome brochure for Camp Myles Standish. *70th Infantry Division Association*

BELOW: 385th Engineers learn how to build improvised two-man rafts from rope and tarpaulins. *The Southern News*, 4 July 1942



SOURCES FULL BIBLIOGRAPHY TO BE INCLUDED IN FINAL VERSION

SOURCES

ABOUT THE PROJECT

Full bibliographies will be included in the final draft of each biography, available later in the summer of 2024.

The West Virginia National Cemeteries Project is a program of the West Virginia Humanities Council, funded in part by the Veterans Legacy Grant Program of the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs and initiated in 2021. All biographies produced as part of this program are composed by West Virginia high school students, who conduct original research on veterans interred at the Grafton National Cemetery or the West Virginia National Cemetery, both of which are located in Grafton, Taylor County, West Virginia.

As home to one of the nation's first National Cemeteries—founded shortly after the Civil War—the community of Grafton has longstanding traditions of honoring America's veterans, including the longest continuously celebrated Memorial Day parade in the United States. The Grafton National Cemetery, located in the heart of the city and founded in 1867, is typically the endpoint of each year's parade. Since the Grafton National Cemetery began to run short of space during the 1960s, the West Virginia National Cemetery was dedicated in 1987, just a few miles outside of Grafton.

The West Virginia Humanities Council is proud to thank the following organizations for their participation in the West Virginia National Cemeteries Project: West Virginia Archives and History, the West Virginia University history department, Taylor County Historical and Genealogical Society, Taylor County Public Library, Grafton High School, and University High School.

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