

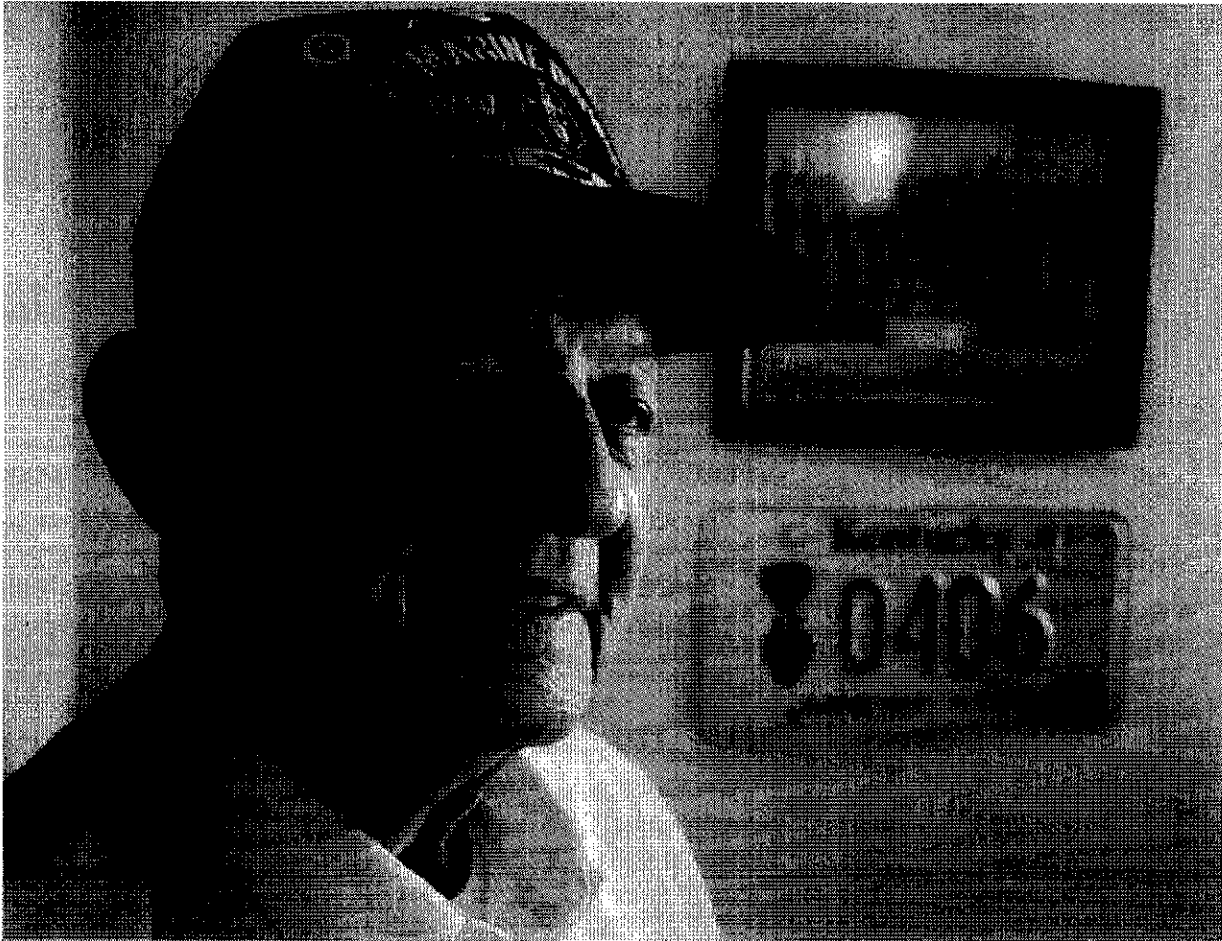
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Tom Eblen: Sole surviving Marines' Lexington Platoon member to be honored

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James Cecil, 88, said he apparently is the last survivor of the 70 young men from Central Kentucky who enlisted in the so-called Lexington Platoon of the U.S. Marine Corps that fought the Japanese in the Pacific islands during World War II.

Tom Eblen — Herald-Leader

By Tom Eblen — Herald-Leader columnist

James Cecil, a Lafayette High grad, is the last surviving member of the Marines' WWII-era Lexington Platoon

Eight months after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, hundreds of people gathered around the steps of the Fayette County Courthouse to honor James T. Cecil and 69 other local boys.

The recent graduates of Henry Clay, Lafayette and other Central Kentucky high schools were forming the Lexington Platoon of the United States Marine Corps. Mayor T. Ward Havelly and other dignitaries spoke at the mass-induction ceremony. A young lady sang the *Marine Hymn*, and women and children wept, the Lexington Herald and Leader reported in late August 1942.

Platoon members left in buses that day for processing in Louisville and training in San Diego. From there, they joined some of the bloodiest battles of the Pacific Theater: Okinawa, Saipan, Tinian and Guadalcanal.

The Lexington Platoon will be honored again Thursday at the Urban County Council meeting. This time, Cecil, 88, will be the only platoon member present. "As best we can tell, I'm the only one left," he said.

Mayor Jim Gray will present a proclamation declaring James Cecil Day. Councilman Jay McChord will speak about how he met Cecil and other World War II veterans while writing and illustrating his 2010 book, *A Veteran's Legacy: Field Kit Journal*.

"We're losing so many of these guys every day, it's good any time we can honor them," McChord said. "We need to remind ourselves of who they are and what they did."

Cecil and Mitch Alcorn, his Lafayette High School buddy and the longtime Midway postmaster, began tracking down their fellow Lexington Platoon members several years ago, searching the Internet and running ads in veterans magazines.

By this time last year, the group had dwindled to the two of them and Elwood Watkins, who earned a Silver Star and three Purple Hearts in battle. Watkins died July 12. Alcorn, who earned a Purple Heart and later fought in the Korean and Vietnam wars as an Army officer, died Feb. 18.

Cecil grew up on a tobacco farm off Nicholasville Road. "We didn't have any money, but we had plenty to eat," he said. "We had milk cows, chickens and a big garden."

When the war came, he decided to join the Marines rather than wait to be drafted. After training, platoon members were scattered to various units of the 2nd Marine Division, although Cecil served alongside Alcorn and a few others from Lexington. "We were just like a big family," he said.

As I talked with Cecil last week, he pulled out a small envelope. Inside was a portrait of a Japanese officer he killed, and money and a ration card he found in the officer's pocket. That wasn't all: The officer was carrying a map of artillery positions, a find that got Cecil promoted from private to corporal.

Cecil earned a Purple Heart for wounds suffered in the battle of Saipan on June 20, 1944. He survived several Japanese suicide attacks on his camps at night.

"The next morning you couldn't walk without walking on a dead Marine or a dead Japanese," he said.

At the battle of Okinawa, a Japanese suicide pilot hit the USS Hinsdale before Cecil's unit could land on the beach. Cecil spent 45 minutes in the cold water, watching for sharks, before a Navy destroyer rescued him.

"We had so many killed and wounded," Cecil said. "Every battle, you just didn't know who was going to be next."

Cecil's only trip stateside came in August 1945, when he was recommended for officer candidate school. Before he could begin, though, U.S. forces dropped atomic bombs on Japan, and World War II ended.

After the war, Cecil had a successful career as the owner of an Ohio-based trucking company. He moved back to Lexington after Janet, his wife of 52 years, died in 1998. In his apartment, he proudly displays photos of her, their sons and their grandsons.

Cecil's health is good, his mind sharp. He finds himself thinking a lot these days about his wartime experiences, including the occasional nightmare with Japanese soldiers "getting after me."

"I just felt honored and proud that I served my country," Cecil said. "Coming off a tobacco patch and going into battle, that was a hell of a change. We were just a bunch of brave boys."

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