

# Experiences Define a Lifetime

*WWII, Korean War veteran celebrates 90 years, shares his story*

By L. Fausz

Chester resident Earl M Tatum is one of 16 million Americans who served in World War II. A USMC WWII Combat Veteran and Korean Veteran, Tatum promised the Lord back in November of 1943, that if He would get him off the islands and back home, he knew he would never sleep on the ground or go hungry again. The Lord kept him alive and Tatum last Saturday along with family, friends and 21 young Marines and their Staff Sergeants, celebrated his 90th birthday in the Davis Fellowship Hall at the Chester United Methodist Church.

"It [today] is wonderfully astounding," Tatum said of his celebration. "I have all my friends here and my family and the Marines – what a surprise."

Nearly 100 guests helped Tatum celebrate. Baby pictures and his official Marine photo adorned the tables in the fellowship hall where guests enjoyed a presentation of his life. A performance of the United States Marine Corps "Marines' Hymn" was sung by the Marine Corps Detachment out of Ft. Lee.

Tatum was 20 when he joined the Marine Corps in January, 1942, a month after Japan had bombed Pearl Harbor. His time served in the battles on the islands of Guadalcanal and Tarawa is vivi. Both marked the transition by the Allies from defensive operations to strategic offensive, and the beginning of offensive operations in the Solomon Islands, New Guinea and the Central Pacific Campaigns that resulted in Japan's eventual surrender and the end of the war. The memory is so vivid he said, "If you try real hard, you can smell it [the bombardment noise and smoke] and hear it today."

His basic training was at Parris Island, South Carolina. He said the base at that time was all sand and they were housed in tents around the perimeter of the parade ground.

Overcrowding from the influx of recruits, his battalion was sent to Quan-

tico Marine base for weapons training. From there they were sent to a muddy base called Camp Lejeune, North Carolina where the Second Marine Division was formed and sent to San Diego in June, 1942 to board ships.

"We had no idea of where we were going," he said. They went to American Samoa for intense training in landings and jungle warfare.

"In early September, my regiment, 2nd regiment, 2nd Division, was sent in as replacements to build up the 1st Division on Guadalcanal, one of the 'islands of Death.'

Guadalcanal was the first offensive action by any American troops in WWII. No campaign in either theatre saw as much sustained action by land, sea and air. This action was from August 7, 1942 until February 10, 1943, approximately six months. The offensive was so critical because the trade supply lines between the U.S., Australia and New Zealand were vital. Tatum said that if the Japanese had succeeded, then Asia, Australia, and New Zealand would have been forever Japanese.

During the first two months on the island, the Japanese controlled the air and sea. His regiment, armed with WW I equipment and supplies, were out of ammunition and food several times due to the control. They learned to use captured Japanese equipment and eat rice and canned fish, seaweed, and local roots, coconuts, limes, bananas, fish and fruit eating lizards. "Good stuff when you are hungry," he said.

While on Guadalcanal, Tatum said most of the troops, including himself, contracted malaria and/or dengue fever.

"Both are debilitating and will put you out of action," he said. "Most of us had one or both of these illnesses." Tatum was hospitalized 12 times with malaria, spending five days in the hospital each time. After his regiment regrouped in New Zealand they



EARL M. TATUM

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- Ret. Sgt. Earl M. Tatum



SGT. (RET. MARINES) EARL TATUM (CENTER) GREET MARINES CORPS DETACHMENT FROM FT. LEE WITH FRIENDS CAPTAIN (RET. AIR FORCE) DENNIS DENMARK (LEFT) AND SGT. 1ST CLASS (RET. ARMY) HOWARD GREEN (RIGHT).

were off to another "island of death," Tarawa.

"We were supposed to take the airstrip in 24 hours. It took 76 bloody and ferocious hours. Some authors described it as he shortest and bloodiest battle of WWII," he said. "Colonel Alexander compared it to the Civil

War battle at 'Bloody Angle' at Pennsylvania Courthouse."

Tatum said there were approximately 1,500 Marines in the initial assault on Tarawa. Reinforcements over two days brought the estimated total to 5,500 Marines. They fought 4,500 Japanese – including 450 South Korean

laborers. Normally, an invading force would have two to three times the defense force.

Tatum said, "At the end we had 3,407 killed and wounded and we captured eight Japanese soldiers. Their general commented that 'it would take a million Marines 10 years to conquer

Tarawa.' We did it in 76 hours."

Tatum retired from a successful career with Brown & Williamson Tobacco Company, raised two children with his wife, Edna (now deceased) and two more children with his second wife, Betty. Both are enjoying retirement in Chester.

## Senior Idol auditions

Auditions for the Senior Idol competition will be held on April 14. Seniors, ages 50 and over, from Chesterfield, Greater Richmond and the Tri-Cities area are encouraged to enter. This friendly competition showcases the talents of local seniors and includes comedians, dancers, ventriloquists, musicians, singers or seniors with unique talents. Twelve contestants will be chosen to compete in the Senior Idol event. Auditions take place at Lucy Corr Village, Community Room, 6800 Lucy Corr Boulevard

The Senior Idol event takes place May 15, at Victory Tabernacle Church, 11700 Genito Road.

This will be the Shepherd's Center of Chesterfield's fifth annual fundraising event. All proceeds will benefit the Shepherd's Center of Chesterfield, a non-profit organization of senior adult volunteers, who donate their time and expertise to assist other senior adults with transportation to medical appointments, help with minor home repairs. The center also offers a variety of classes during fall, winter and spring. Details: 706-9198 or visit www.shepctrchesterfield.org.

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