

THE TWO RIVER TIMES

## SCENE

THE WEEK OF APRIL 20 - 27, 2017



## LIFESTYLES

Monmouth Conservatory Celebrates Spring and Joins Basie's Programs

Page 16

## BUSINESS

Monmouth County to Hold Spring Job Fair

Page 20

## RAYMOND TAYLOR

## Finding the Right Open Door

MEMORIAL DAY MEANS a lot to Raymond Taylor Sr., who has spent most of his 94 years living in Fair Haven. As the day approaches Taylor takes out his U.S. Army uniform – the olive drab, old Eisenhower waist jacket that Taylor can still fit into, bearing the “three up and two down,” chevrons and rockers indicating his rank of Army first sergeant and his Distinguished Service medal and combat infantry badge. His Army cloth side cap can sit proudly on his head, now with the gray hair of age, the cap adorned with insignias of his former outfits, as well as noting his membership in the Red Bank Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) Post 438, alluding to his experiences in World War II and in the Korean War a few years later.

Taylor, barring his deployment for military service, has appeared at every Fair Haven Memorial Service since 1947, according to Mayor Benjamin Lucarelli. At the annual services honoring those who gave the ultimate sacrifice for their country, Taylor often offers a few words about the holiday's true meaning and his personal experiences. “I just want to speak the truth,” he said. “I don't write it down ... I just speak whatever comes into my head and out my mouth.”

And he said he plans to do it as long as he can, God willing, because “I understand what I was fighting for,” he said in his soft-spoken voice and with a steely glint of remembrance in his eyes. “I was fighting for the good of my people.”

“His people” – Taylor is an American who served his country proudly in two conflicts and cared for his wife, Elizabeth, who is now 88, and their seven children. But he's also an African-American man who grew up in the early part of the 20th century, a time when segregation was still very much a part of life.

Taylor and his wife, who also grew up in Fair Haven, recalled going to Red Bank on Saturdays. She and her friends would walk there and back, Elizabeth remembered, “to save the 20 cents the bus cost, 10 cents each way.”

Taylor said he liked to go to the Carlton Theater (now the Count Basie Theatre) to watch the “cowboy pictures.” But as an African-American, Taylor acknowledged, he would have to sit in the balcony.

In his hometown at the time, blacks and whites attended separate churches and he, his brothers and black friends had a separate Boy Scout troop. Taylor was the first African-American to graduate Red Bank High School, back when it was on Mechanic Street.

And the “N-word” was spoken,” he remembered. But, “We learned to live around it,” he said. He and his brothers, William and Kenneth, played with white children and had wonderful relationships with their families in the days before Fair Haven's streets were paved, when

they were simply covered with dirt or gravel. “Sometimes we stayed over in each other's house,” as children, he said.

That official separation of the races was very much part of life that followed Taylor when he was drafted and inducted into the Army in 1942. Taylor served in the all-African-American machine-gunner units assigned to the 450th and 207th Anti-Aircraft Artillery (AAA) Battalions. His units had served in the Alaskan Aleutian Islands before being moved to the farther Pacific theater, stationed in Australia. “Australia didn't want us then, either,” he recalled, referring to his black fellow servicemen.

Taylor went on to see duty in New Guinea, New Britain, Guam, the Philippines, “All the way to Japan,” Taylor recounted with pride.

He ended the war with the rank of “buck sergeant,” the lowest level of sergeant, indicated by a three-chevron, with no rockers, insignia.

Taylor returned to Fair Haven and then again to active military duty during the Korean War. He again served with the 450th Battalion, being involved in the landing and battle at Inchon in 1950, which became a decisive victory for U.S. and United Nations forces.

He finished his military service with the rank of first sergeant; his brothers, William and Kenneth, both gone now, had seen duty at the Battle of the Bulge and elsewhere for William; Kenneth was part of the “Red Ball Express,” a famed truck convoy relying largely on African-American soldiers to provide supplies to the fast-moving Allied Forces making their way across Europe after the D-Day invasion.

“I guess we got it in our blood,” to serve, Taylor observed.

The three boys came to live in Fair Haven when Raymond was 7. Their parents weren't in a position to care for the boys. They were taken in by John and Ella Bailey, who weren't related but became their foster parents. The Taylor boys lived with the Baileys in the River Road home built by John Bailey, who worked as the lighthouse keeper at Twin Lights, Highlands.

“Aunt Ella,” as the boys referred to her, was the child of former slaves who relocated to Fair Haven. Her father, Horace Corliss, was one of the carpenters who helped build the historic Bicentennial Hall/Fisk Chapel, still existing on Fisk Street. The site was the center of Fair Haven's African-American community in the late 19th- and early 20th century.

The Taylors continues to live in the Bailey River Road home, having raised their children there.

Fair Haven was a good town to grow up in, both Taylor and Elizabeth said. As a child, she said, there were just two stores in town, one at each end, and only one policeman.

“We had fun,” Taylor recalled fondly. “We would build wagons. We would go down to the river and jump in,” living the carefree life of the very young.

Coming home from the Army in 1953, Taylor went to work for the Little Silver Board of Education, spending his career as a custodian at Point Road School, the district's elementary school, eventually becoming head custodian. He retired in 1992, but not before establishing some lasting relationships with both teachers and students. “Some of those kids grew up with my kids, played with my kids,” Taylor said. And he cared for his charges, always looking out for them in small ways. “I always knew all their names,” he said.

“I always lectured the boys who worked under me about what was expected of them,” in the school, he said. “To respect the kids, respect the teachers.”

It's been a good life for the Taylors, who have six grandchildren and six great-grandkids, who come to visit when they can. And a life that will continue in Fair Haven, if Elizabeth has any say in it. “I wouldn't live anywhere else,” she said.

For Raymond, his more than nine-decade life provided lessons. One of the most important, he stressed is, “The world's open to you if you just find the right door.”

**“The world's open to you if you just find the right door.”**

DANNY SANCHEZ



By John Burton