



## He's last local Pearl Harbor survivor

### Anniversary of bombing brings back memories

By Kevin Kelly [kkelly@nky.com](mailto:kkelly@nky.com) • December 7, 2008

The nation was in the midst of the Great Depression, but a teenaged Alvis Kinney had no desire to follow his father into the eastern Kentucky coal mines to earn a living.

The Civilian Conservation Corps refused to take him because his father held a paying job. The Army accepted him only after a doctor and a lieutenant fudged his weight to meet the military's minimum requirement.

Kinney was married, with an infant daughter, when he left Fort Thomas in 1940 for an assignment at Schofield Barracks in Hawaii. There, the young man from Pikeville became a featherweight boxing champion.

"I had decided that when I came home I was going to turn pro to see what I could do," he said. "But along came the big fight."

#### 'An amazing man'

An article published last year listed the longtime Highland Heights resident as the lone Pearl Harbor survivor living in Northern Kentucky. Bushy-bearded and surprisingly spry at 91 years old, "Speed" Kinney, as he was known during his boxing days, remains only a few pounds north of his 125-pound fighting weight.

"He's an amazing man," said Maureen McKinney, one of six grandchildren.

The father of three, who was married for 57 years until his wife, Lillian died in 1995, settled into a red couch in his granddaughter's home Friday morning. Between sips of his favorite libation, Maker's Mark bourbon, Kinney turned back the clock more than six decades to the day he survived the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

#### Explosions, then planes

Some details were gruesome. Others simply remarkable.

Kinney was jogging around a golf course near the barracks - part of his preparation for an upcoming bout against a free-swinging artilleryman - when he heard one explosion and another on the morning of Dec. 7, 1941.

A squadron of fighter planes, each adorned with the rising sun on their wings and fuselages, passed overhead.

"I just glanced up and said ... 'Wrong brand,' " Kinney recalled. "I turned and headed back. I was running from palm tree to palm tree. As flight after flight came over, they were strafing the hell out of us and dropping small bombs."

He reached the barracks and ran inside to change into his uniform when he made a startling discovery.

"I was sitting on my bunk. My boots were always right underneath the edge of the bunk, and I put one boot on and had it all laced up," Kinney said. "The other one was across the room against the wall. I went over to pick it up and there was a bullet stuck in the heel.

"When the planes came up, they strafed and a bullet came through the windows. It skidded across that concrete floor. So I pried the bullet out and kept it for a while."

He and his men jumped onto a truck and took off to their positions at Fort Kamehameha near Hickam Field. More than 3,500 Americans were killed or injured during the two-hour attack.

"It was a horrible night," Kinney said. "Black smoke all over the place from those burning ships and burning oil tanks....But we had survived."

## **Friends with author**

Kinney said he served and was friends with James Jones, the author of "From Here to Eternity" and "The Thin Red Line." Both men were stationed at Schofield Barracks and later were deployed to Guadalcanal.

"When I used to come out of the ring, he would meet me with a big cigar," Kinney said. "He'd shove it in my mouth and light it for me. We drank a lot of beer together."

Kinney re-enlisted after the war and served in the Korean War. He was shot twice during that conflict, retired from the Army in 1958 with the rank of Sgt. 1st Class and returned home to Northern Kentucky, where he has lived since.

Kinney took up hiking after retiring from a local security company. Three times after his 70th birthday he hiked the entire Appalachian Trail. Known as "Paw-Paw" on the trail, Kinney last conquered the 2,176-mile trek from Georgia to Maine in 1999. Family members joined him at Mount Katahdin in Maine and completed the journey together.

"The first time I hiked the AT, I was just a kid. I was 70," Kinney joked. "I never dreamed after 21 years in the Army, carrying packs, if somebody would have told me I'd be hiking the AT, I would've hit him."

Flags across Kentucky will be lowered to half-staff today in observance of the 67th anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Kinney will, as always, remember the events of that day and the friends lost.

He has never returned to Pearl Harbor.

"I've got some old buddies buried at the 'Punch Bowl' in Hawaii," he said, referring to the Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific outside Honolulu. "I should have (gone back). Maybe when I hit the lottery."