UCF Veterans Legacy Program

Leo E. Lyons XIII (1919-2005)

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Leo E. Lyons, born on November 26, 1919, was the thirteenth child of Patrick and Ellen Lyons. Patrick was a foreman at the Birchfield Wallpaper Company and Ellen raised their children in their home on the west side of Buffalo, NY. His parents named their youngest son after Pope Leo XIII, known as the People's Pope. They even added the roman numeral XIII to his name.

The Lyons family had a summer cottage in Fort Erie, Ontario, Canada, where Leo and his siblings grew up in nature. He attended St. Joseph's Collegiate Institute for High School and then graduated from Canisius College in 1941. He met Eileen Callahan, a student at D'Youville College, during their college years.

Three of Leo's brothers served in World War II. George and Joe became Naval officers, and Charles served as an Army dentist. Leo, who always wanted to be different, enlisted in the US Marine Corps. The Marines sent him to reserve officer training at Quantico, VA in 1942. Later in life he talked about carrying more than fifty pounds in his pack as they trained on the sandy beaches. Second Lieutenant Leo Lyons graduated and became a Marine in March 1943. His parents, and his sweetheart, Eillen, took the train to Washington DC to attend his graduation.

Leo and the rest of the replacements to the 1st Marine Division (MarDiv) sailed from San Diego, CA to Melbourne, Australia, where they met their comrades who had just fought in the Battle of Guadalcanal. Leo bought Eileen a porcelain tea cup, which he entrusted to a Naval midshipman to take home. His fond memories of Australia included dinners with the most delicious lamb.

He first faced combat leading his platoon, A Company, 1st Battalion, 7th Marines (A-1-7), in Cape Gloucester, New Britain. Beginning on December 26, 1943, the Marines faced devastating conditions over four months, not only from the entrenched Japanese soldiers but from the island's sharp volcanic rock and the constant rain that meant everyone sat in trenches filled with water for the whole battle. Leo earned a Bronze Star with Valor for his actions taking Hill 450, by utilizing "his cool leadership and disregard for his own personal safety," despite fierce Japanese opposition.

The Marines who survived the battle earned some rest and relaxation, or R&R, on the island of Pavuvu before facing combat again on the island of Peleliu starting on September 15, 1944. On the second day of fighting, Leo was injured from artillery shrapnel while riding on a tank. Medics took him to a hospital ship, where he recovered from his injuries. Shrapnel remained in his body for the rest of his life, occasionally rising to the surface.

Leo rejoined the 1st MarDiv for the final battle of World War II, landing in Okinawa, Japan on April 1, 1945. He fought until he was shot in his right arm on May 8, 1945. He tried to return to his men, going absent without leave (AWOL) from the hospital ship until military police brought him back.

He returned to the US and married Eileen on August 9, 1945, just before World War II ended. The young couple had their first son, William, in December 1946. Leo suffered from multiple bouts of malaria in the late 1940s, weighing as little as 95 pounds. He eventually recovered and tried several professions, working for the NY State thruway authority, which was building the main highway across the state. He also tried both law school and medical school, and finally became a Buffalo Fire Fighter, like his brother George, who served as a battalion chief. Leo and Eileen had three more children, including their youngest son Mark, born in 1958, who died at the age of two.

Leo remained in the Marine Corps Reserves until 1966 and had a second career in real estate after retiring from the fire department. He and Eileen both worked for Pierce and Pierce, a local company that built homes in Buffalo's suburbs during the expansions of the 1960s. They both retired in the 1980s. They traveled extensively and spent time with their ten grandchildren. Eileen died in 1997 and Leo in 2005. They are buried together in section 54, site 4123 at Arlington National Cemetery, just outside of Washington, DC and near their son, William.

This biography is based on the Lyons family's archives and the expertise of Dr. Amelia Lyons, Leo's granddaughter. We thank the Lyons family for their generous participation in the UCF VLP program.

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