



Robert "Bob" Hanley led a truly remarkable life. I liked to call him "the ultimate survivor." What else could you call someone who survived an alcoholic father, war, a sinking ship, being a POW, several cancers, including melanoma, a host of other diseases, and raised 6 kids on an enlisted man's salary, cared for a spouse with dementia for years and then thrived for a final chapter after her passing? We called him friend, husband, Dad, Grandpa, Great Grandpa, and I hear there is even a great, great on the way! He was also a man of faith who devoted himself to his belief in God and his involvement as a parishioner in the catholic church. I guess all this isn't surprising for a man who lived 102+ years!

Bob joined the US Navy in 1941 right before the attack on Pearl Harbor. His ship was the USS Houston, docked in the Philippines, and she got underway immediately following that attack. On February 4th, two days before his 20th birthday, the Houston was bombarded. Her captain managed to evade all but one bomb from 37 Japanese fighter planes, but one hit, killing 48 men and wounding 30 more. The war started with a bang for Bob, who was a medic and responsible for at sea burial and mending injured sailors in horrific conditions with a serious fire raging. Ammo was low and the Houston needed repair, when enroute, it ran into a Japanese invasion fleet and was torpedoed, sinking in the wee morning hours of March 1st, 1942. With no more life boats or vests on board, Bob swam for hours in frigid water, finally being fished out by an enemy cruiser. For the remainder of the war, Bob was a prisoner. He was thrown a medical bag and told to treat other soldiers in the camp. He became known as "Doc", performing surgeries with spoons and making poultices out of native plants under the instruction of another POW who had lived in the region. They ate snakes and bug filled rice to survive. Bob was tortured and nearly died from dysentery, but the guys needed him and threw him, near death, onto a truck back to camp while they were working on the death railway, building a bridge from Burma to Thailand. He persevered and survived. Out of 1061 aboard, 368 survived. When Bob passed on September 12, 2024, he was the last survivor of the USS Houston. He liked to call himself the last man standing. Bob never forgot those who weren't as lucky.

What prepared him for all of this? We aren't sure. Born on the west side of St Paul on February 6, 1922, his childhood was spent selling newspapers at the speakeasys his dad frequented so he could contribute to his family's survival in the great depression. He explored St Paul's mushroom caves, and got caught! His grandmother called him a wee Irish Deevil for that one! He learned to fish from Aunt Martha on Pickerel Lake leading to a favorite pastime enjoyed throughout his lifetime. A self-taught dancer, he danced on the Capitol Steamer when it cruised from St Paul to Hastings on weekends for lunch and dinner money. Fats Waller and Louis Armstrong both pulled him aside and said: "You dance pretty good for a white boy." In high school Bob was active in many extracurricular activities. Cheerleading, football, theater and singing with his deep baritone in choir were his favorites. As teens, he and his sister Betty formed a dance team and went on to win 4 dance competitions and 3 Jitterbug contests!

Bob met the love of his life and future wife, Eileen, dancing at the Irish Fair on St Paul's Harriet Island. after a few dances, he boldly picked her up and put her on the hood of a car to give her a smooch, her first kiss! They were 14 and she would remember that kiss and keep in contact with his mother, Frances, while he was MIA and a POW. She called him when he returned, and the way he told the story, he almost fell over when she opened the door for their first date, knocked



out by her beauty and dazzling smile! Their 1st date was in November 1945 and they were married on January 5th, 1946 after a whirlwind romance!

Bob and Eileen went on to travel all over with the Army when dad switched services, raising 6 kids before returning to Minnesota after his discharge. Bob worked for 3M Company in MN, retiring at 56 for a well-deserved break! In retirement, he and Eileen became snow birds, splitting their years between Texas and Arizona and at MN and WI lake homes. It was then that dad reconnected with the other survivors of the Houston and their spouses. They attended a yearly reunion in Texas into their late 90s when dad stopped driving and mom developed dementia.

Many call my dad a war hero, and he was that, but to me, his most heroic act was providing such tender loving care to our mother when she was suffering with memory loss. He kept her safe, buttoned her coat, tied her shoes, fed her and gave her medication with the utmost patience for years until her passing in 2019, and during most of the time she didn't know us. He was exhausted and developed a heart condition of his own, but nothing could stop Dad!

We were concerned about his own health after mom passed, but that survivor instinct kicked in once again and Dad applied his vast capacity for nurturing to himself in his last few years. He regained a zest for life, making many friends at Amira, joining in activities like singing and spiritual groups with other faithful servants of God, going to church every Sunday with daughter Sue and celebrating many happy occasions with family for the last 5 years of his life.

Bob was amazingly independent up until about 2 and a half weeks before he left us to find his dance partner, Eileen in heaven. Our hero, our ultimate survivor, exited this world while surrounded by loved ones at St Therese Hospice House on September 12, 2024. We are bereft, but relieved his suffering was short lived and he is reunited with those who passed before him.

The Hanley Family would like to thank all those at Amira, Accent Hospice team and the Hospice Team at St Therese for the wonderful care they provided him in his last year.

