

Bob Rosendahl, death march survivor, dies at 98

Bob Rosendahl met Bettie Hefti on a blind date in St. Louis on the Fourth of July.

It was a double date. The year was 1946. Someone snapped a photo of the two of them. A bottle of wine was on the table.

The look on Bettie's face, to me, is one of slight irritation. My guess is she's thinking she would much rather be focused on the man sitting across from her.

Bob is oblivious to the camera.

He smiles as he stares across the table at what he knows then-and-there will be his life and his love.

They married 30 days later.

They stayed married for 73 years.

Bettie died Dec. 25 at the age 95. Robert Dale Rosendahl, an American war hero, died 40 days later. The date was Feb. 2.

They had six children; one has died.

They were cremated and will be buried together, of course, at 2 p.m. Feb. 21 at Missouri Veterans Cemetery at 5201 S. Southwood Road.

Their wedding date of Aug. 15 is significant.

Exactly one year prior, Bob was liberated from a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp in China where he had been forced into slave labor, starved and tortured.

When I had the privilege of interviewing Bob and Bettie in July 2015, he remembered that the day he was freed he was so emaciated he could form a circle around his thigh with his middle finger and thumb.

"I got back and I put on **90** pounds in **90** days," he told me.

Clearly, he told me, marrying Bettie was the best decision of his life.

Rosendahl lived through the 60-mile Bataan Death March in the Philippines during World War II.

An estimated 60,000 to 80,000 prisoners marched in groups of 100 in 1942. Each group was accompanied by about 12 Japanese soldiers. About 11,000 of the prisoners were Americans.

Rosendahl told me in 2015 he witnessed prisoners killed by bayonet because they could no longer keep up. He saw other prisoners become hysterical due to lack of water. They were shot and killed.

A boat that served a greater purpose

He built the house where they lived. It's near Republic Road and Golden Avenue.

You might know this house because of the old rusted boat that sits nearby.

It's partially hidden by the brush. Bob built it. It's 38 feet long, 13 feet wide and has 8,000 pounds of steel and concrete in her keel.

It was designed by Rosendahl to sail the seven seas. But it never once touched water.

Yet somehow it served a larger purpose. As a POW, Bob spent his nights imagining the sail boat he would someday build, should he live.

He'd wanted a boat since he was a 14 year old growing up in Minnesota. When he went to the Philippines in 1939, he had plans on how to build that boat tucked in his pocket.

In part, he told me, he survived the hell of war and the killing because of the boat he built in his head. He imagined how he would construct it. He imagined the sails snapping to attention. He imagined the breeze on his face.

"That boat gave me hope," he told me.

His daughters say the boat might end up at nearby American Legion Post 639, at 2660 Scenic Ave.



On the other side of the house is a USA flag. It flies at half staff in memory of a man who endured so much and came out whole.

A long drive to honor a friend

I visited the house Monday. When I knocked I was aware Bob had died, but unaware Bettie had passed away.

Inside were two of their daughters: Martha Gaska, 63, of Springfield, and Kathleen Rosendahl-Garcia, 54, of Houston, Texas.

They were sorting through their parents' possessions. They informed me about their mother's passing and shared some memories.

Bob was born in Saint Hilaire, Minnesota. Last summer, a boyhood friend died in nearby Thief River Falls, Minnesota, 70 miles from the Canadian border. The friend was 98, as was Bob.

The daughters tell me the plan was for Bob's nephew to drive him to Minnesota to be an honorary pallbearer.

"Somehow, that fell apart," Martha says. The nephew could not make the trip.

So, next thing you know Bob disappeared.

"He had his cell phone with him and we called him but his hearing is so bad he never heard the phone," Martha says.

An update came from a relative in Minnesota. Bob had driven the 888 miles in his pickup to attend his friend's funeral.

At some point, the daughters say, Bob ran either a stop sign or a red light.

He was pulled over by local police and was neither ticketed nor arrested. Instead, the officer took Bob to the local VFW Hall and gave the stern admonition to — after the funeral — fly home, not drive home. He did. One of his son's caught a flight to Minnesota and drove the truck back.

When he got home, Kathleen tells me, her father complained his return flight had three stops.

"I told him it's not the easiest thing in the world to find a flight from Springfield, Missouri, to Thief River Falls in Minnesota," she tells me.

Their dad did not want to give up driving, Martha says.

He told us, "I have been driving for 86 years."

"That's when my mom said, 'Listen to what you just said. That's exactly why you shouldn't be driving anymore.'" Growing up, the daughters say, their father was stern.

It was more than the hardships of being a prisoner of war. Their parents, after all, grew up in the Great Depression.

"He was of that generation that saved everything," Martha says. "He was brilliant and could fix anything."

"They had nothing," Katherine says of her parents. "He was very, very stern. But when it came to his grandchildren, I had to ask myself: 'Who is this man?'" Rosendahl almost died of starvation in World War II.

So how is it, I asked him in 2015, that he could possibly sign up to serve in Korea after that?

"It was because they needed me," he said. "They had a bunch of green kids over there."

He told his love he would see her soon

Rosendahl was safely home when in 1959 when he was captured in a prison riot at the Federal Medical Center in Springfield.

The irony was that Rosendahl — a former prisoner of war — was now a guard.

Prisoners seized him and several other guards. One inmate held a knife to Rosendahl's throat as he marched him around.

Federal prison employees were called in from Leavenworth, Kansas, to regain control of the prison. They used tear gas. As a result, they wore gas masks and could neither hear nor see well. When Rosendahl approached they mistook him for a prisoner and beat him with lead pipes.

"My dad was a hero, but my mother was, too," Martha says.

"Mom should get a special award," Kathleen says. "She put her life on hold for all of us. She got her GED at the age of 65."

Their mother was a beauty, they say.

"She used to work for a printer and she said that the men would stop the printing press when she walked by," Martha says.

No wonder Bob never noticed that camera on their first date.

Bettie loved Cardinals baseball and attended a World Series game in 2006.

On her 90th birthday, the family celebrated upstairs at Ebbets Field on East Walnut Street with the New Creole Jazz Band and a baseball theme.

Five years later, with Bettie in hospice care, they hired the same band to celebrate her 95th birthday on Dec. 21. The party was at the house.

Bob had only recently returned home. He fell and broke his hip on Nov. 12. He had a partial hip replacement and — at age 98 — did well in rehab.

"Dad is such a fighter," Martha says. "We were able to get him home on Dec. 19."

"Mom sat up and listened to them play for a while and she had a bite of birthday cake and dozed off and would never really wake up," she tells me.

Four days later, on Christmas morning, Robert Dale Rosendahl, a man who always honored his word, held his wife's hand as she took her last breaths.

"Bon voyage, my love. I will see you soon."

These are the views of News-Leader columnist Steve Pokin, who has been at the paper seven years, and over his career has covered everything from courts and cops to features and fitness. He can be reached at 836-1253, spokin@gannett.com, on Twitter @stevepokinNL or by mail at 651 Boonville Ave., Springfield, MO 65806.

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