

Building a Life While Helping to Rebuild the World

By Laurie Snyder



Bob and Avis Holt of Lamorinda – nearly 70 years of love and adventure, and still counting. Photo Ohlen Alexander

From the time they set their boots on the ground in France through the wingtips they wore out from the 1950s onward, America's greatest generation helped save the world. They somehow found the strength, even after witnessing the worst of World War II, to put aside their differences for the greater good.

Robert Holt of Lamorinda is a member of that generation. An honest-to-god hero with a Bronze Star and Purple Heart, his is the story of the Americans who came home, and then helped to rebuild shattered and still developing nations. His achievements are so numerous that any chapter from his autobiography would merit its own full newspaper article.

Born in Ellsworth, Iowa to a successful farmer, he attended Iowa State University. While there he met his future wife Avis – at a football game. “We were in love,” she says. “At that time, you felt like you had to grab happiness.”

Participation in ISU's Reserve Officers' Training Corps eventually led to Holt's appointment as the non-commissioned officer over seven other Army recruits. He and Avis married in the fall of 1943; their first child, Renee, was born in 1944 after Holt shipped overseas. “We were assigned to G-2, which is military tactics.... We operated at nighttime; we kept our tanks hidden.”

And then, just before the Battle of the Bulge, their luck ran out. As Germans shelled their tank, Holt was blown free – outside onto what was left of the vehicle. His buddies were killed; he spent months moving from infirmary to bomb-besieged Paris to Cheltenham Spa's hospital, recovering from facial burns and shrapnel wounds to the head, foot and leg. He finished his tour in Ireland, and headed home on Thanksgiving, 1945. He arrived at the same time as Avis' brother who had survived his own hell – as a German prisoner of war. Over the next 10 years, Holt and Avis added son, Rand, and daughters, Robin and Michele, to their family.

Holt returned to Iowa State in 1946, and switched majors to chemical engineering. After graduation, he became a process engineer for Westvaco Chemical Company in Newark, Calif., at a salary of \$271 per month. Like many other veterans, he worked hard, changing jobs and even founding companies as better opportunities opened up.

And then in 1956, he made an even bolder move which changed the Holt family's lives for good. He landed a job with Permanente Cement which, he explains, “was the springboard for the enterprises that Henry J. Kaiser

founded” – aluminum, steel and other companies, including Kaiser Permanente. Kaiser was “a sparkplug and leader,” says Holt.

In 1959, that sparkplug put Holt in charge of finding raw materials to build a cement plant in Hawaii. From there, Holt went on to become the chief chemist for Kaiser's Cushenbury plant. After helping that facility expand, he was promoted to plant manager.

But it was in 1968 when life really took off. Appointed as the Far East production manager for Kaiser's International Division, Holt headed for Okinawa. Avis, Renee and Robin made the move later. “I was managing director of Jalapathan Company and Ryukyu Cement,” says Holt. Oversight of additional plants would follow as Kaiser extended its reach.

Indonesia. Guam. Hong Kong. New Guinea. Khartoum. China. Holt hunted best practices and oversaw operations and services related to the manufacture of materials for the bricks used to line the equipment that made the steel – which helped drive the post-World War II economy. Several facilities were so critical to developing economies that they were dedicated by heads of state.

For the Jalapathan Company of Bangkok, Holt visited an old plant in Takli. “At that time they had quarry workers using hand drills and hanging from the side of the mountain to drill and shoot the limestone,” he says. He modernized procedures with explosives to “increase their production rapidly and be cost efficient.” He also troubleshooted for the 1971 Cha-Am plant opening near the King of Thailand's summer palace. Both Holt and his wife have vivid memories of that facility's dedication.

“The King and his entourage arrived in the afternoon,” says Holt. “The staff and I escorted the King to the control room. I had the starting switches festooned with flowers. I asked the King to press each switch in sequence which started the huge ball mills and the rest of the plant.” Later, the King personally checked out silos at the plant's shipping canal and housing near the seashore.

With success, Holt marched up the executive ladder, as did the Holt children. Grandchildren are now blazing trails, too.

And yet, Bob and Avis Holt are still just a couple of farm kids at heart – wide-eyed and sincerely grateful for their good fortune. “I owe 90 percent to my wife – because she is so good to me,” he smiles.

Having recently turned 90, Holt will mark another milestone with Avis this October as they celebrate their 70th wedding anniversary. One has the sense that they have only just begun.

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Samira Says

Samira Davi is a Nurse Liaison for ManorCare Health Services in Walnut Creek. Samira has over 10 years of experience working in health care in Contra Costa County, which has gained her a wide view of what is important to the health care consumer. She will be posting common questions and comments in each issue of the Lamorinda Weekly. You are welcome to contact Samira directly at 925.270.8766

ManorCare Pre-Op Counseling

At ManorCare, we recommend that patients who are planning to have surgery visit a few post-acute rehab centers prior to their hospitalization. These pre-surgery visits can go a long way to reducing stress and anxiety before and during the time that you spend in the hospital.

We would be pleased to assist you in arranging a visit to a ManorCare facility. Please call one of our centers to schedule a tour or to ask questions. For patients who are unable to visit or would prefer “pre-op counseling” in a physician's office at the time of an appointment- we are happy to do that as well. We can meet with you in either location and explain what you can expect from a post-acute rehab center. Further, ManorCare staff will be glad to help you in determining your insurance coverage for rehabilitation services.

ManorCare's post-acute care service is designed to improve your transition back to the community. After surgery, illness, or injury, you want to get back to your life as quickly as possible. ManorCare's post-hospital centers are your best way home after a hospital stay. With complex medical and rehabilitation services delivered by a team of highly skilled professionals, the ManorCare team focuses on getting you home. ManorCare's clinical teams have demonstrated track records of success and a proven commitment to clinical excellence.

You can decide where you rehabilitate. We encourage you visit, to ask a lot of questions, to do your research, and to ask your physicians for their opinion. We are here to help; please feel free to ask any member of our team for assistance at any time.

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