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McClellan: COVID-19 takes the Last Man

Bill McClellan

Jul 3, 2021



Dave Miller in his sailing days

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Dave Miller was born in January 1925, the youngest of two sons of Charles and Mary Miller. Charles worked at a hardware store. Mary stayed home. The family lived on the far north side of St. Louis in a time when neighborhoods were

defined by the parish that served them. For the Millers, that meant Most Blessed Sacrament. The church is still standing, but barely. It is open to the elements. The neighborhood has deteriorated along with the church.

Dave and his older brother, Dan, attended Most Blessed Sacrament grade school and then McBride High School. That, too, has long since closed.

Just as Dave was finishing the first half of his senior year, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. He received his draft notice when he graduated in the spring. So did many of his classmates. When Dave went to the induction center downtown, he figured he would be going into the Army, but another McBride graduate was working at the center. "I bet you'd like to go into the Navy," he told Dave.

So Dave became a sailor. He was a radioman.

He served aboard the U.S.S. Holt, a destroyer escort. The destroyer escorts were smaller and slower than destroyers, and were mainly used against submarines. The famous war correspondent Ernie Pyle wrote a story about them:

"What do destroyer escorts do? They roll and they plunge. They buck and they twist. They shudder and they fall through space. Their sailors say they should have flight pay and submarine pay both. They're in the air half the time and under the water half the time."

The Holt had a crew of 11 or 12 officers and about 200 enlisted men.

The enlisted men lived in very close quarters. The beds, or racks in Naval jargon, were stacked three high.

In addition to the enemy, the sailors had to contend with nature. In September, 1944, the Holt was along the East Coast providing escort service against German submarines when a hurricane hit. The Holt survived the storm, but a member of its hunter-killer group, the U.S.S. Warrington, went down with the loss of 248 men.

The next month, the Holt went through the Panama Canal and joined the war in the Pacific. She spent much of her time in and around the Philippines, but she sailed through other, more dangerous waters, as well. She was at New Guinea and Okinawa. She sunk no submarines, but she was attacked by enemy aircraft on numerous occasions. Once, a kamikaze plane was shot down on its approach and splashed into the water only about 100 feet from the Holt. The pilot got out of the plane and was swimming. The crew of the Holt lowered a skiff — they called it a whaleboat — and set out to rescue the pilot. But as the whaleboat approached the pilot, the men thought he was hiding something in his left hand. Concerned that he might have an explosive charge of some sort, they shot him.

These sailors were not storming the beaches, but make no mistake: They were young men at war.

By the way, Dave was not on the whaleboat.

The bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki ended the war and saved the Holt from having to participate in an invasion of Japan. Instead, they sailed to San Francisco. Some of the guys, including Dave, rented the penthouse suite at the St. Francis Hotel. They invited everybody at the hotel to come by for a party. The next day the hotel manager asked them to leave. He said half the hotel had been at the party and the other half had been on the phone complaining about the noise.

The sailors soon became, once again, civilians.

Dave got home and asked out a girl he had dated before the war. She was busy. Dave's father, still working at the hardware store, said the store had just hired a young woman Dave ought to meet. Her name was Rose Marian McCormack.

She and Dave celebrated their 71st wedding anniversary in November 2019.

Also upon returning home, Dave got a degree in business from St. Louis University. His older brother, Dan, also went to St. Louis University and became the captain of the basketball team that won the National Invitation Tournament in 1948.

Dave lived a quiet life of service and stability. He played poker with his brother and his grade school friends on the first Saturday of the month for more than 20 years. On the second Saturday, he played pinochle with his wife's family. He was a founding parishioner of St. Angela Merici church in Florissant. He was the long-time president of St. Vincent de Paul.

He and Rose had two children, a son and a daughter. Both were adopted. Dave coached grade school soccer and softball. He was a calming influence. "Have a nickel's worth of patience," he would say if somebody were upset. After a game, he always treated at Dairy Queen.

I met him briefly in 2002 when I wrote about a McBride reunion. Dave told me he had worked at Fehlig Brothers Box and Lumber Company for 52 years. "I didn't know a damn thing about lumber and I still don't," he said. He made light of his wartime service. He said he sailed through the Panama Canal. "People pay \$1,000 for that." He also said that Bora Bora was the prettiest place he had ever seen.

He did not have much desire to see the rest of the world. He was a homebody. That was a reason he stayed with the job at the lumber company. He wanted to be home with his family for dinner. That was worth more than money.

Shipmates from the Holt had reunions over the years. Dave went to some of them. Occasionally a shipmate would visit.

Eventually, the young sailors became old men. The shipmates formed a Last Man club.

In January of this year, Lyle Anderson, son of the executive officer of the Holt, contacted Dave's daughter, Mary Kellett, and told her that her father was the last man. The original plan had been to have some kind of ceremony with the sons and daughters of the old shipmates sharing a drink with the Last Man. That is a plan Dave would have endorsed. Even in his 90s, he enjoyed a Manhattan. The pandemic made the gathering impossible.

Shortly after being designated the Last Man, Dave contracted COVID-19. He had had a first shot of the vaccine, but not the second. He was hospitalized. The last thing he told his daughter before going on a ventilator was, “Things will be better tomorrow.” He died Feb. 25. Rose had died a year earlier.

David C. Miller was buried March 26 at Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery.

There have been more than 3,100 burials at Jefferson Barracks since the pandemic kicked in last March. They have been quiet affairs for seemingly unremarkable men and women, ordinary people who rose to whatever challenges were put in front of them.

The cemetery always gets visitors on the Fourth of July and if you’re among them this Sunday, you might give a nod to these men and women who have been buried with little fanfare during the pandemic, including the Last Man from the good ship Holt.

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