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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

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.

Reach the reporter at: laurie@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

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