



Railsplitter Obituary



John E. Domagalski 24 June 1916 – 30 November 2004

Born to Eternal Life Tuesday, 30 November 2004 at the age of 88 years.

Beloved husband of the late Mary E. Loving father of Robert, Barbara Ann (Joseph Berres) Walz and Thomas Domagalski. Proud grandfather of Lisa (Arnold) Madela, Steve and Jason Berres and Angela Domagalski. Greatgrandpa of Kyden and Dylan Madela. Brother of Eleanor Toryfter, Florence (Stan) Andreshak, Anthony (Ruth) Domagalski and Marion (Walter) Grunow. Further survived by many nieces, nephews, other relatives and friends.

John proudly served his country in the U.S. Army for 32 years.

He was a Survivor of the Pearl Harbor attack in 1941.



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Article from Milwaukee Journal Sentinel:

John Domagalski was an enlisted serviceman, stationed high on a hillside above Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941.

He was a radar section chief, teaching others how to use the new and still-primitive radar equipment just installed. American planes were expected from the mainland, so no one was concerned when the radar showed incoming aircraft.

Then the planes came in low, and he saw the Rising Sun emblem on the side.

"He had eye contact with one of the pilots," said Barbara Gnad, a family member. "The man started grinning at him and put his thumb up.

"It was all so close, he couldn't believe it."

No phone had been installed for the new radar system, so Domagalski grabbed flags to signal the base below.

By then, the bombs were falling. The harbor was under attack. America was at war.

Nearly 60 years later, he saw the news of other planes attacking, this time on Sept. 11.

"He got really depressed," said his son, Bob Domagalski. "He was having flashbacks of Pearl Harbor."

John Domagalski, of Menomonee Falls, died of natural causes Nov. 30. He was 88. Services and burial will be held today, the 63rd anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor. Full military honors are planned.

"Most of his life he didn't want to talk about his war days, and I think that's pretty typical of his generation," his son said.

The first time he really began to talk about the attack was about 1970.

"We'd been out at a family gathering, and my son was using signal flags for Boy Scouts," Gnad said.

"I did a lot of that," Domagalski said.

Suddenly, he was telling the whole story of that day. His family knew that he was a witness to history.

"As he got older, his time in the service and Pearl Harbor was a really important part of his life," Bob said. "He never returned to Hawaii -- he would have loved to go -- but he never really had the financial resources to do something like that."

Instead, he enjoyed annual picnics with other Pearl Harbor survivors from the area, held at Rotary Park in Menomonee Falls.



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"He really enjoyed getting together with his Pearl Harbor friends," Bob said. "There aren't many of them left."

A year ago, only 5,500 members of the national Pearl Harbor Survivors Association survived, including 107 from Wisconsin. In 1991, the 50th anniversary of the attack, membership had stood at 18,000, according to the association.

Domagalski also loved marching in Memorial Day parades, wearing the group's trademark Hawaiian shirts and white pants.

He marched in his last parade in 2001, refusing to ride in a car.

"I'm a soldier," he declared. "And when they tell me to march, I march."

By the next day, his family realized he was suffering symptoms of a stroke.

His health began to decline. Domagalski would be in other Memorial Day parades, but his family insisted that he ride, not walk. He suffered another stroke only days before last Memorial Day.

Domagalski grew up on Milwaukee's east side, struggling to find work during the Great Depression. He got a little work as a substitute letter carrier, but it was hardly enough to get by. Then he landed a spot with the Civilian Conservation Corps, planting trees in northern Wisconsin.

"He was so proud of that work," Gnadts said. "He had a good time up there. They lived in tents during the summer. He was so glad -- it was a job -- and he loved the outdoors."

Many years later, on a trip to Eagle River, Domagalski pointed toward some large trees.

"I planted those, and they were only this high," he said, gesturing to show 12 inches.

He could stay in the corps only 18 months, then it was home to Milwaukee and not enough work. Domagalski joined the Army in 1940.

After Pearl Harbor, he served on radar duty in Iwo Jima. Domagalski left the service in 1945, but this time he had more to come home to.

A young woman named Mary "Marie" Gnadts had moved from St. Nazianz to Milwaukee for wartime work.

"She became friends with my dad's sister, and my aunt encouraged her to write letters to my dad overseas," Bob said.

They began dating after he returned, marrying in 1946. Domagalski landed a full-time job with the post office. He also joined the Army Reserve in 1949. He finally retired from the Reserve in 1976, then a chief warrant officer with the 84th Division's 4th Brigade in Milwaukee. He served a total of 32 years.

"He was a hard worker," said his son, speaking with affection. "He was a very strong and stubborn person. . . . Whenever there was a crisis in the family, we leaned on his strong shoulders."



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Profiled in a military publication as he retired, Domagalski talked about his service.

"I'd rather have a free Army than the old bonded Army," he said, adding that morale was better in a volunteer Army. "Americans can do what they have to do. The American fiber will come through when it has to."

"He had that fiber," said his son.

Domagalski's wife died almost a year ago. In addition to his son, survivors include daughter Barbara Ann Walz; son Thomas; sisters Eleanor Toryfter, Florence Andreshak and Marion Grunow; brother Anthony; grandchildren; and twin great-grandsons just born Nov. 11 in Hawaii.

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Author: Amy Rabideau Silvers