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The will to live

POW recounts events of his survival through WWII

Natalie Ryder
Community Editor

Robert Hanley, of Forest Lake, is one of the last remaining survivors from more than 300 men taken as prisoners of war after surviving the sinking of the USS Houston, a heavy cruiser which sank during World War II. The Houston, which held a crew of more than 1,000, sank in the Sunda Strait off the southern coast of Sumatra and north Java, where all survivors were taken as prisoners of war by the Japanese.



Photo by Natalie Ryder

Robert Hanley, 99, was a prisoner of war for more than three years after surviving the sinking of the USS Houston off the coast of Java in a battle against the Japanese in 1942.

For more than three years, Hanley endured the camps and sporadic relocation to prisoner of war camps across the region from Singapore to Burma. Survivors of the battle of the Sunda Strait remained in this region for the duration of a war that gripped the world.

Allied forces liberated the camp on Aug. 17, 1945, following V-J Day on Aug. 15, 1945, when the Japanese announced their surrender. Formal surrender documents were signed aboard the USS Missouri on Sept. 2, 1945, signaling an end to the war. According to Hanley,

he and one other survivor from the USS Houston are still alive, both 99 years old.

"I think every now [and then] about guys that didn't make it. I think they're the real heroes, the ones that didn't get back. We're the lucky ones. We got back. And I always think about that,

"I made up my mind I'm going to get back."

- Robert Hanley, WWII POW

think about how lucky I was to make it back," Hanley said.

Hanley, a St. Paul native, enlisted on Jan. 5, 1941, and was sent to boot camp in Great Lakes, Illinois. He was first stationed on a destroyer in the Pacific before being sent to the Asiatic fleet in the Philippines, where he was stationed on the USS Houston, later nicknamed "the galloping ghost of the Java coast."

According to James D. Hornfischer, naval historian and author of the book "Ship of Ghosts," the Houston and HMAS Perth, an Australian light cruiser, were searching for and attacking Japanese naval forces throughout the Java Sea. The Battle of the Java Sea on Feb. 27, 1942, set the stage for the battle to claim the Asiatic fleet.

Hanley recalls stopping to refuel and get more ammunition in between battles, but said they ran out of ammunition in the Battle of Sunda Strait.

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Forest Lake adds new community development director position

Hannah Davis
News Editor

The Forest Lake City Council voted during its Monday, Oct. 25, meeting to create a new community development director position. Forest Lake City Administrator Patrick Casey said the biggest reasons he believes it's important to create the position is to facilitate the process of new housing developments or economic developments.

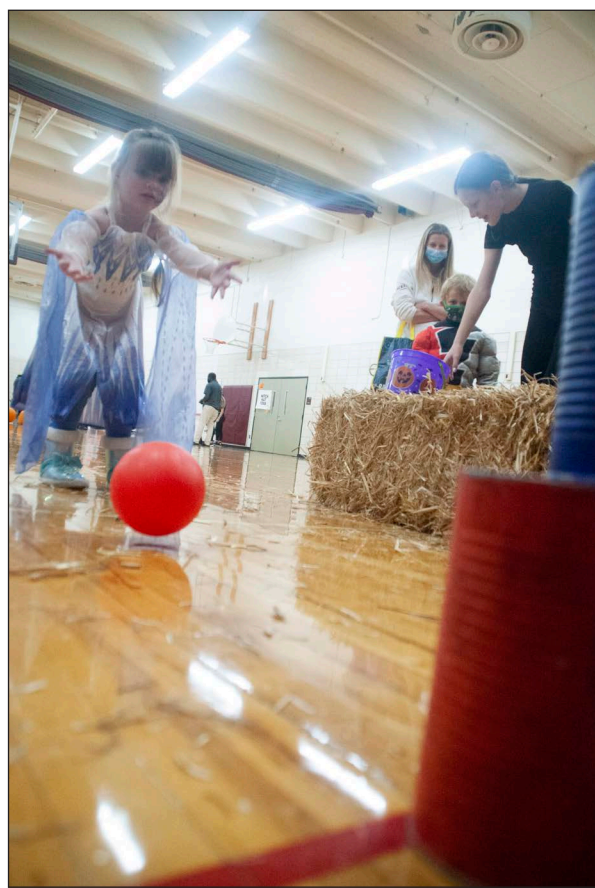
"It's challenging staff to keep up with that," Casey said.

He also stated that with the recent resignation of Zoning Administrator Donovan Hart, it gave Casey the opportunity to evaluate the position and how it could be best handled moving forward. Casey mentioned that in 2014, the zoning administrator position was created by merging three roles into one, which was during a time when development was still slow

following the housing market collapse in 2008. He said that while that may have been appropriate for the time, housing and commercial development is much more heavy today than it was then, and it is difficult for staff to keep up with the demands of the increase in projects.

During the Oct. 11 meeting, Casey said: "The prior position, Donovan's, had to look at housing, zoning enforcement, prop maintenance enforcement, and had to do agenda items for the Planning Commission; the job was just too much for a single position. A new position like this would do the outreach, but would coordinate the development process internally. We just don't do a very good job. Developers get frustrated when we can't clearly tell them what they need to be do-

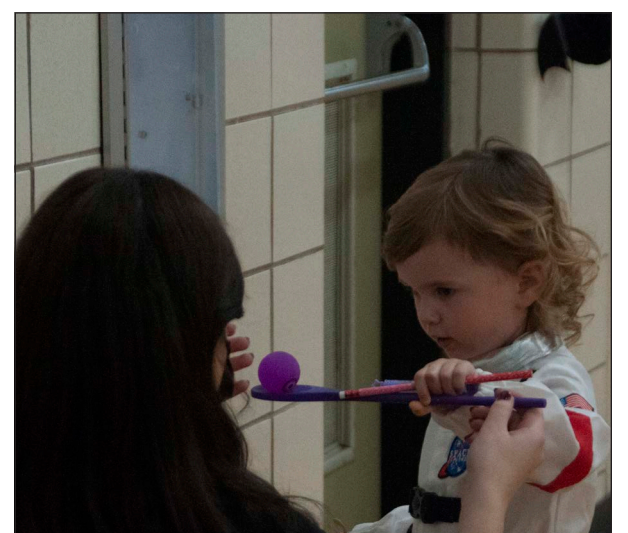
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Photos by Hannah Davis

The Forest Lake Area School District hosted its annual Unscary Halloween event for preschoolers at the education center on Thursday, Oct. 28.

Kids enjoy 'unscary' Halloween



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News



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POW

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“All we had left was star shells, and you can’t do anything with star shells,” he added.

The Battle of Sunda Strait took place the following night on Feb. 28, 1942. It ended in the early hours on March 1 with the Houston and Perth sinking after coming under heavy Japanese attack.

“We were intending to go to Australia, but we never got there. When we went through the strait we met this Japanese landing party and all of their ships and got into a sea battle there,” Hanley explained.

Typically, the Sunda Strait was not manned due to under-water currents, according to Hornfischer, which is why the remaining Asiatic fleet sailed toward that passage to get to Australia. Except the Japanese were working on one of its largest landing parties, resulting the Asiatic fleet’s final battle in the region.

“The Perth was with us and they got sunk first, then we followed after that,” Hanley said.

Throughout the battle, he was working as a medic on the top deck of the Houston, helping any men that needed it throughout the battle until it sank.

“First they did ‘abandon ship,’ then they didn’t abandon ship. Then they called it again: ‘Abandon ship.’ Then they did,” Hanley laughed about the confusion prior to it sinking in which many Marines decided to go down with the ship.

However, when he heard the call, he searched for a life jacket, to no avail. So he stripped down



Submitted photos

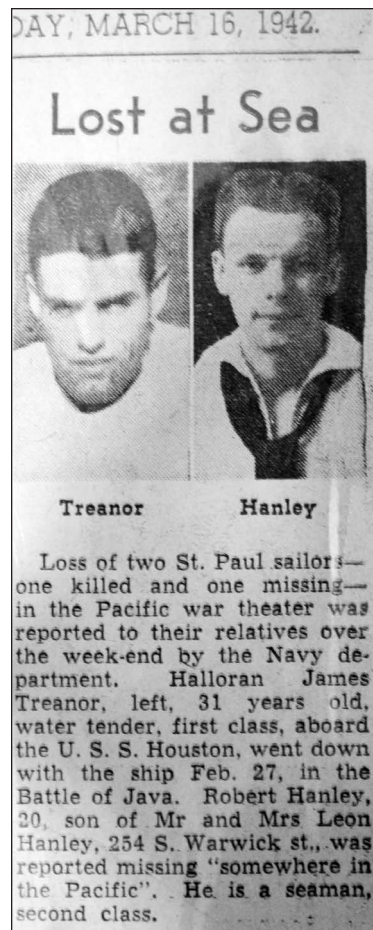
Hanley joined the Navy prior to the Pearl Harbor attack in January 1941. He trained in Great Lakes, Illinois before being sent to a fleet in the Pacific.

to his shorts and dove off the back side of the ship and swam for a while until he heard some people on a lifeboat nearby.

“I can’t remember how many that were on there; probably more than it could hold,” Hanley recalled about the lifeboat, adding he held onto the side of it while floating in the water.

The group of men floated there for what Hanley thinks was eight hours until the sun started to rise over the water, when a Japanese boat came to capture them.

“They took the hood off the machine gun and aimed it at us, but they didn’t shoot us. ... They picked us up and put us on one



Hanley kept a newspaper clipping which reported he was missing at sea following the sinking of the USS Houston on March 1, 1942.

of their ships,” Hanley said.

From there, Hanley remembers boarding what he assumed to be a ship meant to transport Japanese troops. He added many of them got dysentery on this voyage, and he was lucky to recover.

“They put us to work right away,” Hanley said about how they had to carry supplies on shore after they were initially transported near the first camp on Batavia, Java, Bicycle Camp, where military personnel rode bikes.

He worked there as a medic for six months, following the lead doctor and surgeon, but got promoted quickly.

“First I worked in the surgical ward, and then they decided to put me into surgery,” he said.

Following this six-month period, Hanley said they took 120 of the prisoners to Singapore where he was in charge of taking care of all their medical needs.

“I was only 19 years old, so I didn’t have a whole lot of expe-

rience, but some,” he added.

They weren’t there long, since Hanley recalls being transported to Burma where the Burma Railway, also known as the Death Railway, was being built to connect Burma (modern day Myanmar) to Thailand. He worked in various camps as a corpsman, taking care of ulcers and operating on people’s legs.

“We never lost anybody’s leg, we were lucky,” Hanley recalled about the work he was doing.

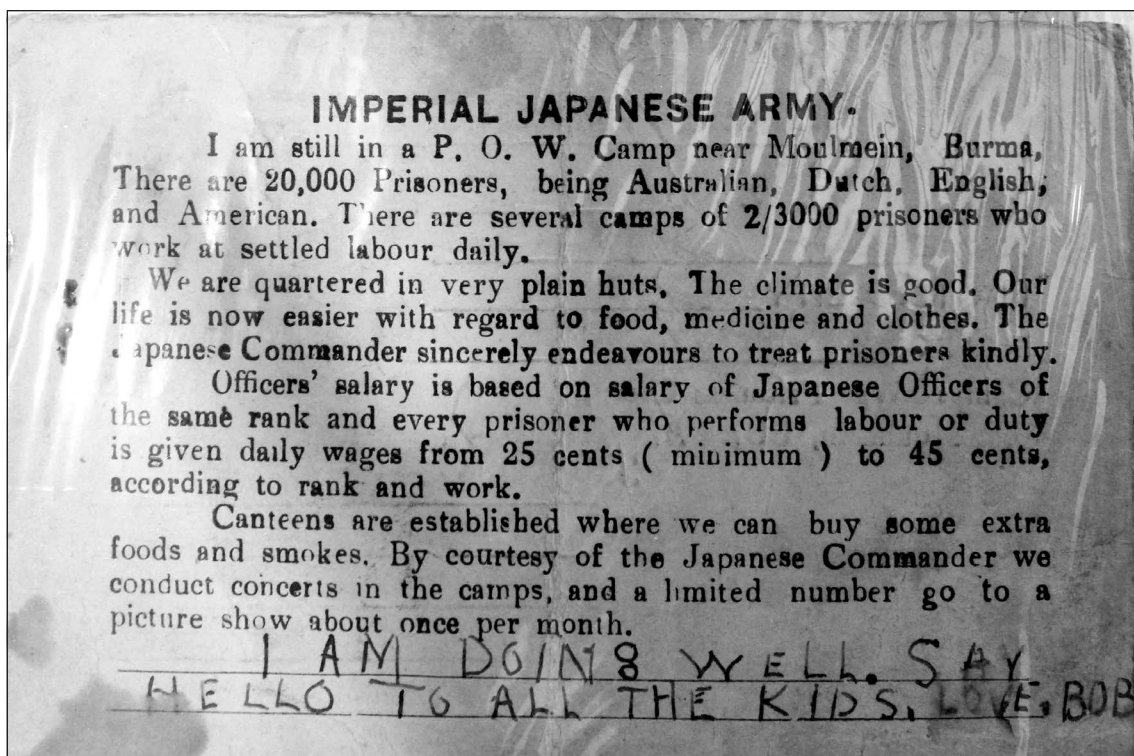
He added that medics were treating tropical illnesses like malaria and beriberi with limited supplies, which kept him busy. The daily work he had as a medic motivated him to keep going and survive. Throughout all this time, his mother thought he was missing in action until Hanley was able to send a card through the Japanese army, letting her know he was alive.

“My mother didn’t find out until 1943,” Hanley said, noting how he couldn’t write about the true nature of their harsh conditions or it wouldn’t have been approved to mail. Hanley was in the camps for more than a year after that until his camp was liberated on Aug. 17, 1945.

“I was very happy. I was very happy when they dropped those leaflets and told us the war was over.” He laughed at the initial thought of how he felt those days leading up to it. “Course we kind of knew it,” he added, noting how they had a radio hidden in a canteen to monitor Allied forces’ advancements against the Japanese.

“I always had an idea I’d make it. I just, in my mind, I thought I would. ... You have to have a will to live. ... I made up my mind I’m gonna get back, that’s all,” Hanley said.

Following liberation, he got 120 days of leave, in which time he married his wife, Eileen, whom he knew since they were 14 years old. After that, he resumed his service in the military and retired at 41 years old with the designations as a chief in the Navy and a master sergeant in the Army.



In a scrapbook that contains newspaper clippings, photos and documentation of Robert Hanley’s time serving in World War II is the letter he was able to send his mom while at a Japanese POW camp.

CORRECTION

In the article “Forest Lake man charged after fatal crash” in the Oct. 21 edition of the Forest Lake Times, it was written that the defendant and victim, along with two others, had stopped by the victim’s parent’s house where they consumed more alcohol prior to the fatal crash. That was incorrectly stated in the original criminal complaint and was amended after the article was written, but before it went to press. The group did not consume alcohol at White’s parents house. The Forest Lake Times regrets and apologizes for this error.

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