

Walter Straka

October 23, 1919 ~ July 4, 2021 (age 101)

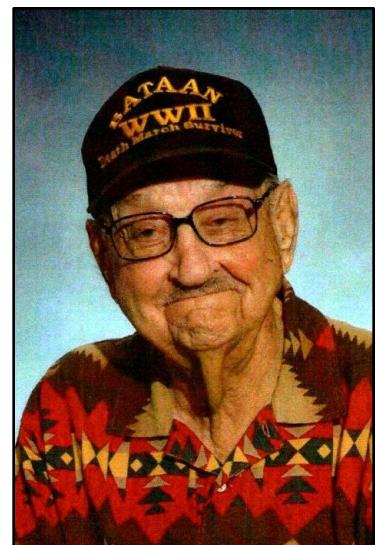
Obituary

Walter Straka, lifelong resident of Brainerd and the last Minnesota Bataan Death March survivor, passed away peacefully on July 4th, at the St. Cloud VA Hospital at the age of 101. Walt and his wife, Cleta, spent the early years of retirement traveling all over the US in their motor home. They eventually settled in Pharr, TX, where they wintered for 36 years. Walt liked to fish and greatly enjoyed a cabin on Lake of the Woods for many years. He was passionate about cards, spending many evenings around a card table playing double deck pinochle with his sons, Peter and Greg.

Walter is survived by children, Marsha Kate Haaf (Duane), Greg (Anita), Paul (Molly), Elizabeth Miles (Mark), Peter (Julie), and Sarah Porter; many grandchildren and great-grandchildren; brother, Jim; sister, Helen; and many nieces and nephews. He was preceded in death by his wife, Cleta; daughter, Jane; and grandson, Willie.

A Mass of Christian Burial for Walt and Cleta will take place at 11:00 a.m., Monday, July 12, 2021, at St. Francis Catholic Church in Brainerd. Father Anthony Wroblewski will preside. Visitation will be two hours prior to Mass beginning at 9 a.m. at the church. Interment with Military Honors will take place at 2:00 p.m. at Minnesota State Veterans Cemetery near Camp Ripley.

Source: Nelson-Doran Funeral Home, www.nelson-doran.com/obituary/Walter-Straka



Walt Straka, Minnesota's last surviving Bataan Death March survivor, dies

Of the 64 men from the tank company that left Brainerd who went with the 194th to the Philippines, three were killed in action and 29 died as POWs. Thirty-two survived captivity.

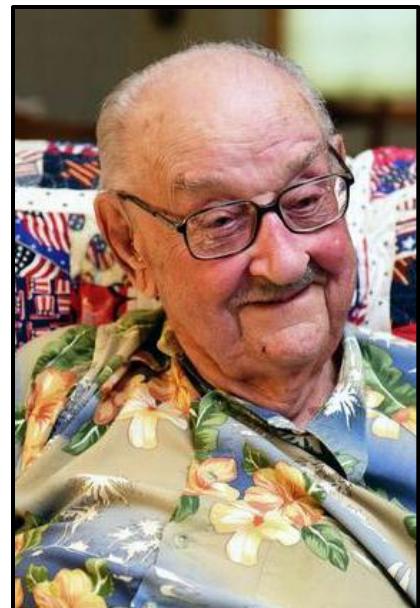
Walt Straka smiles at his home in 2015. The Bataan Death March survivor died Sunday, July 4, 2021, in Brainerd. Steve Kohls / Brainerd Dispatch

Walt Straka, lifelong Brainerd resident and Minnesota's the last survivor of the infamous Bataan Death March, passed away Sunday, July 4. He was 101 years old.

Straka's death was announced in a Facebook post by 1st Combined Arms Battalion, 194th Armor:

"It is with heavy heart that we announce that Walter Straka passed away this morning on Independence Day, July 4th 2021 at the age of 101. Mr. Straka was an extraordinary man who by his own account 'should have been dead a thousand times.' Mr. Straka was Minnesota's last living survivor of the Bataan Death March where he and thousands of others were forced to march 65 miles over 6 days. After the war, Mr. Straka resided peacefully in Brainerd where he ran a successful business and raised a family. He was very supportive of the 1-194 AR and was frequently seen honoring the memories of his brothers in arms at the Wreath Laying Ceremony every year on April 9th, which commemorates the fall of Bataan and at the Bataan Memorial March every September. Our thoughts and prayers are with the Straka Family as we all mourn the loss of an American Hero on this Independence Day."

Source: Brainerd Dispatch, Jul. 4, 2021



A century of heroism: The life of Brainerd's Walt Straka, Bataan Death March survivor

From Brainerd to Bataan, the life of Walt Straka was the story of a diehard fighter and American hero.

Walt Straka — the last survivor of A Company, 194th Tank Battalion — laughs in 2017 at the Brainerd National Guard Armory. The armory open house highlighted military history during Brainerd History Week. Steve Kohls / Brainerd Dispatch file photo

"My life, from day one, if I could put it all down on paper I could write one hell of a book," Walt Straka said on his 100th birthday. "I could write a book that you couldn't put down and quit reading it."



How's this for a storybook ending? An American war hero is born in 1919, comes of age during the Great Depression, survives pitched battles and years as a prisoner of war, then returns home to marry his sweetheart, raise seven children and chase the American Dream. Then, nearly 80 years after his ordeal, at the golden age of 101, he dies on the Fourth of July. If a Hollywood screenwriter pitched this, they'd be laughed out of the room, yet this is no less than the life of Walt Straka.

Straka died at 4:30 a.m. Sunday, July 4, 2021. With his death, Minnesota bids farewell to its last survivor of the Bataan Death March, when Japanese soldiers forced American prisoners of war on a brutal 60-mile trek through the Philippines that claimed tens of thousands of lives. The United States also says goodbye to one of its few remaining World War II veterans and the last tangible links to a century of change.

It is, in a way, fitting that Straka was born in the year 1919, while the city's iconic water tower was under construction, because he was there, witnessing the turmoil and triumphs of the 20th century, always as a lifelong resident of Brainerd.

Walt Straka as a member of the 34th Tank Company based in Brainerd. Later, the 34th were merged with units from California and Missouri to form the 194th Tank Battalion. Company A of the 194th received orders to reinforce troops in the Philippines in September of 1941, three months before the United States entered WWII. It was there, on the Bataan peninsula, Straka and his comrades faced horrific atrocities that would come to be known as the Bataan Death March.

No one was more surprised that Walt Straka reached the age of 101 than Walt Straka himself. For a man who admitted he "should have been dead a thousand times" during his horrific war experiences, the fact Straka reached such a venerable age speaks to a kind of serendipity, filled with the miraculous and absurd in equal measure, that only he could appreciate.

This strange sort of serendipity was to remain with him, much like a guardian angel, throughout his life.



There was an element of the miraculous, certainly. How else can a man survive a firefight — isolated, trapped and nearly cooked alive in a tank — and not chalk it up to blind luck? Or, when the bullets shrieked and split the air between his legs, a hair's breadth from killing him, is it strange to wonder if divine intervention had something to do with it?

“When I got back, I had so many things wrong with me I just got on my knees and prayed to God. I said, ‘Please give me 10 years.’”

In the darkest, most incomprehensible moments of horror, there was absurdity as well. As Straka recalled, there were points during the march when he and his comrades had to dive to the ground, lest they fall victim to slashing katanas wielded by laughing Japanese soldiers as they drove past on a jeep. It was a twisted, demented game of drive-by beheadings, said Straka, who could only shake his head, shrug, and chuckle mirthlessly at the memory. How else would a rational person respond? Is there a rational response to that degree of inhuman cruelty?

Every one of his comrades who died was a hero in their own way, Straka said. What separated those who made it from those who didn't had nothing to do with bravery, toughness or moral character. Strong, physically robust athletes were just as likely to collapse and die during the march as comparably scrawny men were to hang on and survive.

In Bataan, Straka said, what separated the living from the dead was a simple matter of chance, little more than a roll of the dice.

There were these experiences, and much more, during Straka's captivity as a prisoner of war during the Bataan Death March.

Bataan

His introduction to war was an early one. At the tender age of 17, Straka lied about his birthdate and signed up with the U.S. Army National Guard — a decision that proved fateful, altering his life forever.



Walt Straka (center) stands at attention during basic training at the young age of 17. Having lied about his birthdate, Straka signed up with the U.S. National Guard, a fateful decision that would ultimately change his life forever. Submitted photo

He, alongside many sons of Brainerd, was placed in the 34th Tank Company. In 1941, the 34th were ordered to Fort Lewis, Washington, for training, where they were combined with units from St. Joseph, Missouri, and

Salinas, California, to form the 194th Tank Battalion. Company A of the 194th received orders to reinforce troops in the Philippines in September of 1941, three months before the United States entered WWII.

Stationed near Clark Field on the island of Luzon, the 194th represented the first tank unit in the Far East before WWII. Isolated and without supplies, they fought on until ordered to surrender with the fall of Bataan on April 9, 1942. Straka and his comrades in the 194th were among the approximately 75,000 American and Filipino troops who walked more than 60 miles to Japanese prison camps in what became known as the Bataan Death March.

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In the Heart of the Lake Region Vol. 68, No. 17 United Press Feb 26 BRAINERD, MINNESOTA, FRIDAY, APRIL 10, 1942 NPA Feature Service and News Pictures VOL. 68-NO. 211

Sink Japanese Cruiser---

BATAAN FORCES TRAPPED

Guns of Corregidor Blast Enemy

POUND ENEMY LINES AND SHIPS ALONG SHORELINE

WASHINGTON (UP) — The 12-inch guns of four tiny, rock-bound island forts in the mouth of Manila Bay have become America's last voices of authority on the island of Luzon in the Philippines.

The largest of these bastions is Corregidor, a tadpole-shaped piece of rock and jungle which rises 600 feet above the narrow entrance to the bay. It was first fortified by the Spaniards and its guns fired futilely at the fleet of Admiral Dewey when he steamed into the bay in April, 1898, to destroy the Spanish fleet.

Today it has been turned into a bristling armory, with winding tunnels and silos carved out of the solid rock and concrete roadways running beneath the jungle growth to feed ammunition to the gunners.

No man fortification in Port Miles, which has been one of the

Brainerd's Valiant Heroes in Bataan Peninsula



Tiny Forts Hold Out in Command of Manila Bay

BULLETIN
WASHINGTON (UP) — The navy announced today that most of an estimated 3,500 bluejackets and marines who participated in the defense of Bataan have been evacuated to Corregidor fortress.

The evacuation, carried out under the cover of darkness, was ordered by Lieut. Gen. Jonathan M. Wainwright "when it became evident that it was no longer possible to hold the peninsula in the face of overwhelming enemy odds."

AN AUSTRALIAN PORT, Saturday (UP) — An American submarine has slipped safely into port after sinking at least one and perhaps four Japanese cruisers and surviving 69 depth charges that exploded around her in the waters off the Dutch East Indies.

WASHINGTON (UP) — American forces still fighting in the Philippines exacted partial revenge for the loss of Bataan by sinking a Japanese cruiser supporting new enemy landings on the island of Cebu, the War Department announced today.

The front page of the Brainerd Daily Dispatch 79 years ago on April 10, 1942. Brainerd's valiant heroes, the men of the 194th Tank Battalion trapped on the Bataan peninsula. Brainerd Dispatch/BrainerdHistory.com - <http://sections.brainerddispatch.com/history/pages/>

Of the 64 Brainerd men from the tank company that went with the 194th to the Philippines, three were killed in action and 29 died as POWs. Thirty-two survived captivity.

It's important to remember how grounded in Brainerd this outfit was. Long before they stepped foot on Luzon, the men of Brainerd's 34th Tank Company shared an incomparable bond. Peers. Classmates. Cousins. Neighbors. Friends. It's the kind of vital, seemingly commonplace relationships that form the bedrock of every small town community.

Like tempering steel, the trauma of Bataan transformed this bond into something beyond anything the folks at home could understand. In a way, these men were both torn apart and joined together by what happened. And, it resulted in something beautiful — even while the survivors passed, one by one, over the years — that remains undying long after they're gone.

Former state Sen. Don Samuelson, whose father Walter Samuelson died during Japanese captivity, described the close-knit fabric of the 34th. The men and their families were intertwined, Samuelson said, and he knew many of them for decades. Amid all this was Straka, who Samuelson described as a kind, simply decent man.

There were many conversations over the decades, Samuelson said, but it seems to be human nature that even while his friend died at the venerable age of 101, no amount of time is enough to ask everything that needs to be asked, to say everything that needs to be said.

"It's pretty sad seeing the last man in that outfit having passed now," Samuelson said. "All that history gone. I think about those guys a lot. To think that Walter could last nearly 102 years, after surviving what he survived? It's simply phenomenal."

Mere words aren't up to the task of expressing what happened in April 1942. The Bataan Death March rests in the historical record as a sibling of atrocities like the Rape of Nanking or the Holocaust, and it's there for a reason. Interviewing Straka, the conversation was often fragmentary, if vivid, with passing comments that alluded to the horror, but rarely explored it further. It was like a glance through a peephole at some howling nightmare on the other side, but what he left is more than enough.

"Nobody could make up a more horrible story," Straka said at a wreath-laying ceremony in 2015. "I couldn't lie and make up a worse story."

Straka spoke of starvation, disease and killings that occurred with the clockwork regularity of a slaughterhouse. He described how, in April 1942, captured American soldiers were forced on a grueling trek, 65 miles through Luzon over the course of six days. Straka was fortunate to avoid a bullet during that time. His luck didn't save him from a rifle butt to the spine that rendered him paralyzed for days. He mentioned being hollowed out by dysentery during 42 months of captivity. He talked about brutal slave labor in Japanese work camps, desperately trying to sleep in the grass each night while mosquitoes gathered and his body burned with malaria. Later, he was forced to eat rotting fish in the bowels of a Japanese "hell ship" while fellow prisoners withered and died around him.

"What one human being is capable of doing to another human being," Straka confided in a friend after a Bataan Memorial Death March ceremony in 2019. He shook his head. "Animals. It boggles the mind."

Perhaps one of the most striking images from Straka's life was his brush with history in mid-August 1945.

Just three days after the desolation of Nagasaki by the second atomic bomb, Fat Man, Straka found himself on burial detail. The city was flattened. Shadows lingered — many of them faint, radioactive impressions of human beings erased in a flash. The bodies he carried were blackened husks of their former selves. And the buildings, he said, were like melted wax.

It's the kind of horrific, mind-boggling image that belongs in a H.P. Lovecraft story, but while Lovecraft could only imagine it, Straka lived it.

It was there, in Japan, that Straka learned of the Japanese surrender to the Allied forces on Aug. 15, 1945. A Japanese guard approached Straka and ordered him to start up the camp's intercom system to make an

announcement. Straka was well aware some Japanese soldiers used such a command as a ruse to shoot American prisoners on the pretext they were trying to stir up dissension or looking to escape.

Naturally, Straka thought he was about to die.

It speaks to the kind of man he was, that indomitable, wrought-iron will, that Straka clenched his fists, straightened his emaciated frame — over 6 feet tall, yet whittled down to a pathetic 89 pounds — and defied the order.

“You can go to hell,” he spat.

After the war ended and Straka returned home, he was so battered and broken he didn’t give himself much of a chance.



Brainerd's Walt Straka, a 99-year-old World War II prisoner of war and Bataan Death March survivor, was honored at the Vikings game at U.S. Bank Stadium Sunday, Nov. 4. File photo by C. Morgan Engel

“When I got back, I had so many things wrong with me I just got on my knees and prayed to God,” Straka, a lifelong Catholic, said. “I said, ‘Please give me 10 years.’”

Let’s just say God granted Straka’s request and then some.

Brainerd

Born Oct. 23, 1919, Walter B. Straka was 10 years old when Black Tuesday hit and the Great Depression descended on the world. Much like the rest of America, the Strakas of Brainerd struggled to put food on the table and heat their home — though, Straka noted his was a humble, if stable childhood.

As such, it wasn’t unusual when, decades later, Straka heard he was to be honored with the Congressional Gold Medal, he quipped, “Is it real gold?”

A touch of humor, yes, his son Paul said at the time, but it also spoke to the fact that for Straka — the son of a shoemaker who came of age during the worst economic crisis in American history and later worked as the bread-winner for a family of eight — the symbolic often took a back seat to the material.

To Straka's children, their father was a firm-handed provider with a disciplinarian streak. He could be quiet, no-nonsense, and very reserved at times — though, there were always those moments of uncharacteristic behavior, or his penchant for being outspokenly blunt, that hinted at a different internal life.

He was always strong-willed and assertive, with a tendency to be domineering and a wild streak that mellowed as the years passed. Shortly before they shipped out, the 194th took a company photo in full-dress uniform and, upon closer inspection, one of the soldiers sported a visible black eye. That's Straka and his black eye was courtesy of a bar brawl the night before. This, Greg said, was perfectly in keeping with his character.

He was always outspoken and time did little to soften the sharp, acerbic edge. After experiencing what he experienced, Straka wasn't inclined to view the Japanese in a sympathetic light and his deep-seated rage at what they did to his friends was to remain with him until death.



In an undated photo, Walt Straka poses with his wife Cleta (center), as well as Cleta's sisters Helen (left) and Marge. Submitted photo

"A man once asked me, 'During the march, did the Japanese ever show you kindness?'" Straka said, smiling tightly as his rich, warbling voice took on an edge. "I told him, I said, 'I once looked in a Japanese dictionary. I couldn't find a word for kindness.' That shut him up."

In the twilight years of his life, Straka was invited on a goodwill tour of Japan, all expenses paid to the tune of \$60,000. In typical Walt Straka fashion, Straka — who freely professed he could forgive, but not forget what the Japanese did to him and his friends — told them, in much less polite language than used here, to shove the proposal where the sun doesn't shine.

In contrast, Straka's wife Cleta served as a counterweight that kept his life in balance. Where Straka could be strong-willed and demanding, Cleta was gentle and sweet, a natural caretaker and mother. They were inseparable, always involved in each other's lives from day to day, moment to moment, and together they shared seven children, many grandchildren and great-grandchildren, and 64 years until Cleta died in 2009. In death, Straka leaves behind six children — Gregory, Paul and Peter Straka, as well as Marsha Kate Haaf, Sarah Porter and Elizabeth Miles. His daughter Jane Straka preceded him in death in 1976, having died at the age of

19 in a head-on collision by Lum Park that also claimed the life of his young grandson, Willie. It was a tragedy that literally brought Straka to his knees.

“I kept looking at him, when he would sit there and he wouldn’t respond. You know his brain is working, so you wonder ‘Is he reliving it?’ He couldn’t share a bed with my mom because he’d wake up in a cold sweat, flailing, because he was still in the war.”

The specter of Bataan loomed in the background of daily life, Greg said, and history sometimes coaxed it out in the open. When his eldest son Greg didn’t have his number called during the lottery in 1969 and they learned he hadn’t been conscripted into the Vietnam War, his father reportedly jumped up and down with exuberant joy.

Straka was a proud veteran and regularly attended events involving the 34th Tank Company, but he remained adamant none of his children should join the military. In his mind, his trauma was enough service to one’s country for the whole family put together.

Physical health issues lingered for Straka years after the end of the war, but the dark hells of the mind never ceased to haunt him. When he was young, Straka aspired to be a lawyer, but that just wasn’t a realistic possibility when he returned. He couldn’t find the frame of mind to pursue a career in law as he hoped, so he settled as a used car salesman with a construction outfit on the side. Starting in 1950, until he retired in 1976, Straka was a fixture at East Side Auto on 113 NE Washington St.

But, then, sometimes the weight of his experiences in Luzon were debilitating, rendering him unable to work altogether. His children sometimes wondered why he and Cleta never shared the same bed through decades of marriage. It was only when they were older and wiser that they realized Straka’s violent nightmares simply made it an impossible arrangement.

He didn’t dwell on what happened. He settled down. He married Cleta. He raised and put his children through college without them paying a nickel. He was a member of St. Francis Catholic Church all his life and he was active in numerous local nonprofit organizations like the Elk’s Club and American Legion. He worked hard until he retired and sold the dealership to Greg. He remained active, so uncommonly spry he could be spotted shoveling his own sidewalk well into his golden years.

Straka also opened up. It was only late in life, in roughly the last decade, that Straka ever spoke openly regarding Bataan and his experiences during the war. It was simply a topic he didn’t broach, Greg said, and when he finally did, as an older man, the vivid experiences he relayed to them were nothing short of astonishing.

Yes, the memories were horrific and painful to hear, Greg said, but it was good his father was losing his filter, that he didn’t care anymore and he was in a place to talk freely about what happened.

“I don’t know if time ever did anything to heal it, if that was why he was able to talk about it,” Greg said. “I kept looking at him, when he would sit there and he wouldn’t respond. You know his brain is working, so you wonder ‘Is he reliving it?’ He couldn’t share a bed with my mom because he’d wake up in a cold sweat, flailing, because he was still in the war.”

It was something of a bittersweet revelation in Straka’s twilight years. Tragic, because while World War II came to an end on Aug. 15, 1945, it never quite ended for Walt Straka, who had to fight his own battles in his

dreams. Beautiful, because even in the darkest moments of despair, Straka never lost that tenacity, that fighting spirit that sustained him right until the end.

“The only thing that bugs me these days are those darn nightmares, but I just have to get up and fight them off,” Straka said Oct. 24, 2019. “That’s just life, I suppose.”



Walt Straka poses with his wife Cleta on their wedding day. With Cleta, Straka shared 7 children, many grandchildren and great-grandchildren, as well as 64 years together before Cleta died in 2009.

Source: Branard Dispatch, July 6, 2021



Walter and Cleta