



Robert Tills

Mar 9, 1918 - Dec 8, 1941

BIRTHPLACE: Manitowoc, WI

SOLDIER DETAILS

HIGHEST RANK: Ensign

DIVISION: Navy, Patrol Squadron 21

THEATER OF OPERATION: Pacific

HONORED BY: Sister, Jean Aplin

BIOGRAPHY

Early on the morning of Dec 8, 1941, nine Japanese fighter planes swooped down on Malalag Bay in the Philippines and strafed and sunk two US Navy seaplanes at the very outset of World War II. All of the Americans escaped unharmed except Ensign Robert G. Tills, 23 of Manitowoc WI, who was cut down by machine gun bullets. 'Ensign Robert Tills died in the fusillade of bullets from the Japanese strafers, the first American naval officer killed in the defense of the Philippines,' the Naval Historical Center wrote. Tills' sister Jean was 11 years old at the time. 'Our minister heard over the radio that he was among the missing and called us,' she said recently. 'Then somebody came to the house a couple of weeks later and said he was killed.' But Robert's body was not recovered. Memories were all that Jean and her parents and sister had of their beloved Bob. 'Airplanes and flying, that was his passion,' Jean Aplin, now 78 remembers. 'He wanted to do that from the time he was little. I was just very proud of him and idolized him. He was my hero.' Robert, whom the Navy named a destroyer escort after in 1943, was one of 78,000 Americans still missing from World War II. 'I always thought the Filipinos had probably found him and buried him somewhere over there,' Jean said. She had pretty much given up hope of ever learning what had become of her brother when the Navy notified her this past summer (2008) that his remains had been recovered from aircraft wreckage in Malalag Bay and identified through his dental records. 'Oh, I'm very happy about it,' she said, 'because I'm the only one left, and I've just always wondered, and I'm glad he's finally coming home.' But the story doesn't end there. 'We found the girl he was going to marry, his fiancée, and she is still alive and in good health,' Jean said. Jean, who lives in Colorado Springs, CO, found Vicki Quandt Lee through the Internet, living in Hendersonville, NC. 'She married somebody named Robert E. Lee, and she just couldn't call him Bob, so she always called him Lee,' Jean said. Now 89 and widowed, Vicki hopes to join Jean on March 23, 2009, when Bob Tills is finally laid to rest with full military honors at Arlington National Cemetery.