

Eulogy of Robert (Bob) Erlich

Suwannee Shipmate

Tomorrow, September 10, is the eighth birthday of Uriel Moshe Solomon, son of Elly and Avi, grandson of Rhisa and Nissan and great-grandson of Sassie and Fada.

A few days ago, knowing that Fada was very ill, Uri told his mom that he only wanted one birthday present, that Fada would get well. When we went around the table on Erev Rosh Hashana, with our home full of people and everyone supposed to say something good and what is wished for the new year, Uri as usual tried to duck out, say nothing out loud. But he told me all he wanted was for Fada to be ok. Fada, however, left us on the second day of Rosh Hashana and we had to explain to Uri that prayers are not always answered, but that he was lucky to have known his great-grandfather, and Fada was lucky to have known him.

Fada. For all of us from the family he has been Fada for nearly 40 years. I think that before our daughter Elly could say abba or ima, mom or dad, she was saying Sassie and Fada. And so we all started calling them the same. Quite appropriate, as being grandparents was, I am sure, the best part of their lives.

When I first met him, some 44 years ago he said, "Call me Bob." I never did. I said call me Nissan. In his waning years, with memory failing, he still remembered my name. With his unique Hebrew pronunciation it always came out "nuisance."

We got off to a great start. I first met him when he came to New York to his mother's funeral. He had not been in New York for years. He was, like me, a history buff. He asked me to take him to grant's tomb. I took him to what I had always thought was the place, but it was someone else's tomb. This was before computers, GPS etc. But we finally found it and had a good laugh. And that laugh continued all these years.

Fada was a proud man, a proud American, a proud Jew. Above all, a proud parent and grandparent. But a modest man. Stubborn, opinionated, obstinate, but loving.

Fada was one of 'the greatest generation', the term used by Tom Brokaw to describe those who grew up during the great depression and went on to fight in world war two. It is to these men – and women- that we owe our freedom, and for those of us who are Jewish-anywhere in the world-our very existence.

Fada was born in NEW YORK. His father was a successful tailor, and he spent his early childhood in Great Neck, NEW YORK, an area of estates and wealth. Down the street Johnny Weissmuller was in training for the 1928 Olympics and Fada always used to say Tarzan taught him how to swim. Thank you, Tarzan, as when his ship the wasp was torpedoed during world war two, Fada had to swim in and under burning oil, until he was rescued. We owe you, Tarzan.

Along with so many others, Fada's father lost his money with the Wall Street crash in 1929 and the family (father, mother, brother, sister and Fada) moved to Troy, NEW YORK, where his father continued as a tailor, but now catering to a much poorer clientele. He stayed in Troy through high school and at age 17, with his parents' permission, he enlisted in the U.S. Navy and was trained as a radio operator and gunner for small fighter planes and assigned to the USS Wasp. WW II was already raging in Europe and although the U.S. did not enter the war until the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor the Wasp and other US ships in the Atlantic patrolled protecting American ships bringing vital supplies to besieged Britain. When the U.S. entered the war the Wasp continued for a few months in the Atlantic. Fada always talked about short visits to Scotland, going to dances with the locals and meeting the few Jewish women to be found wherever his ship docked. He may not have been an observant Jew, but he always knew he was a Jew and knew he would marry a Jewish woman.

Meanwhile it became clear that the U.S. needed more aircraft carriers in the Pacific and Fada and the Wasp went through the Panama Canal in June 1942

He was on the Wasp near the Solomon Islands when it was hit by several Japanese torpedoes on September 15, 1942. The fires on the ship were too extensive and all were ordered to abandon ship

Fada did not talk much about his experiences in the navy-but he did talk about how he swam in burning water-oil until he was picked up. He loved the Wasp and liked to say how the Japanese torpedoed the ship, but could not sink it and actually an American ship finally fired torpedoes at it to sink it.

Fada used to say that one of the advantages of surviving your ship's sinking was that they gave you leave and sent you home for a short while to show your parents that you are still alive. He told me once that he went home to Troy and found that his girlfriend had dumped him for someone else. He never got a "Dear John" letter-just looked her up and was told he was history. I guess we should all be thankful. He was. He went back to the Pacific and was reassigned to the escort carrier USS Suwannee and saw action all over the Pacific Theater, around New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, the Marshalls and the Philippines.

Most of all he was proud of being on the Wasp. About ten years ago he went to a gathering of veterans of the Wasp. He was so proud of being a navy man. And was he proud when he and Sassie were at the graduation ceremony when Adi graduated the Israel naval officers course at the top of his class. I remember the small reception where I introduced Fada to Alex Tal, then commander of the Israel navy. I said, "Fada, meet a Jewish admiral," and as they shook hands Fada beamed and looking at Adi, said, "I did my part, too."

With the end of WW II, Fada was assigned to the shore patrol. He was always interested in meeting Jewish girls and met Ruth Nepom at a sorority dance at the University of Washington while on duty in Seattle. They stayed in contact and met again in San Francisco and married. He settled in Portland and lived the rest of his life in Portland.

Sassie and Fada had three daughters. Fada was proud of each one. I think he was even prouder of his grandchildren. Now, as a grandparent myself, I think I can understand this. He had a full life. Family, friends, work, travel and vacation, sport, the whole nine yards. He worked hard, provided for his family, was active with his friends in 'The Ramblers' and other groups, but it was as a grandfather that he excelled. I can't say that he taught me to be a father, but he sure did show me how to be a grandfather. He just loved doing anything with the grandchildren. He even became coach of his grandson Adi's soccer team. When we lived in Portland he was always around, always doing what he could with the kids. He loved his grandchildren in Switzerland and was willing to tell all that Elana and Mira were the smartest girls in all of Europe and Gabi the smartest wherever the hell he was, be it Europe, China, Africa, anywhere.

Fada loved to read and to talk about history. He liked a good joke and could tell a few. But he was a quiet sort, not pushy. I think that is why all of us who were at Morgan and Elana's wedding will never forget Fada's short comment when the rabbi told Morgan he was committing himself to be a good husband and to love honor support and cherish Elana. Fada, sitting in the front row just spurted out, "You better," and everyone heard and laughed and approved.

There is so much that could be said about Fada. His last years were not easy on him or on those who loved him. He lost much of his will to live after his wife, Sassie died. His daughters and grandchildren tried to encourage him, but to no avail.

He deserved better, much better. But he was blessed with a family that loved and appreciated him his daughter Barbara was constantly involved in making his waning years as comfortable as possible. Now it is up to us to remember him and Sassie and continue with our families, as they would have wanted it.

And tomorrow I will once again tell his great grandson, Uriel that is because of Fada that he is able to celebrate his birthday.

Written and Delivered by Nissan Teman (Son-in-Law)