



## IN MY OPINION

By Irene Mandra

### **BROTHER MARINUS and the SHIP OF MIRACLES**

The Korean War began on 25 June 1950 and that July thirty five crew and twelve officers were flown to Norfolk, VA to take the S.S. Meredith Victory out of the laid up fleet in the James River. The Meredith Victory, a merchant ship operated by Moore-McCormack Lines, had been chartered to the Military Sea Transportation Service. She was placed under the command of Captain

Leonard P. LaRue, then 37 years old. During the War the ship operated under military orders and many times it was part of a Navy Task Force. Sailing from Norfolk on 28 July and after an expedited passage through the Panama Canal it completed loading a military cargo in Oakland, CA for delivery to Yokohama, Japan. Significantly, before departing Captain LaRue stopped at Old St. Mary's Church in San Francisco to say a prayer for the ship and the men. After discharging in Yokohama the ship was combat loaded with tanks, ammunition and personnel and sailed in a 22 ship convoy for the Inchon Landing on 15 September 1950. After a brief enemy air attack all units and equipment were safely landed and the Meredith Victory returned to Yokohama with 13 North Korean prisoners who had surrendered to the ship at Inchon. After several shuttle trips between Japan and Korea Captain LaRue received emergency orders to take the Meredith Victory to the port of Hungnam, North Korea. This was during the Chosin Reservoir Campaign. The port, on the east coast of Korea, is about 300 miles south of the Russian naval base at Vladivostok. This was in December 1950 and the port was surrounded by approximately 100,000 Chinese communist troops and approaches to the port by sea were through a heavily laid minefield. The main line of the port's defense was a perimeter 5,000 yards from the center of the port with an outpost extending 1,000 yards beyond. The Command Post was located in a cave along the beach. In the face of overwhelming enemy forces General MacArthur had issued orders to evacuate all military forces to Pusan and other ports in the south.

Many thousands of North Korean refugees were pressing toward the waterfront at Hungnam, their last avenue of escape from the threat of annihilation by communist forces. Soon after arrival at Hungnam Army representatives boarded the ship, one of the last in the harbor, and advised that the final perimeter at the port was rapidly closing with the enemy attacking from one quarter to a half mile from the beach. In view of these exigencies they refrained from issuing an order but requested Captain LaRue if he would volunteer to evacuate the remaining refugees massed on the beach. He was asked to confer with his officers but without consultation he promptly agreed to take out as many as he was able. On the evening of 22 December 1950, nested next to a Liberty ship loading military cargo, Captain LaRue ordered the embarking of the Korean refugees

**Bob Lunney, Staff Officer, SS Meredith Victory**

Most of the military had been pulled out and parts of the city were aflame from enemy gunfire. While loading the refugees Navy Underwater Demolition Teams were placing explosives throughout the port and the pier adjacent to the ship. At all times the ship had the protective fire overhead from the 7th Fleet. The constant naval air and gunfire support allowed the ship to embark 14,000 refugees, including 17 wounded. Among the refugees were the parents and older sister of Moon Jae-in, President of Korea. The refugees were loaded like cargo as Captain LaRue ordered them placed in the ship's five holds and on the open deck. The refugees brought some earthly possessions with them – children carried children – mothers were breast feeding babies with another child on their back. That winter was bitter cold and the holds were not heated nor were they lighted. The ship had no interpreter nor was there any food or water for the refugees. The ship departed Hungnam on the afternoon of 23 December, the last ship to leave with refugees, and soon after departure the entire port was blown up. The ship arrived in Pusan on Christmas Eve 1950 and because Pusan was so overcrowded with UN forces and refugees the ship on Christmas Day was ordered to Geoje, an island about 50 miles southwest of Pusan, where on 26 December all refugees were safely disembarked plus 5 babies born enroute from Hungnam. An historical humanitarian feat occurred that Christmas 1950 when a total of about 98,000 refugees were saved from North Korea.

Never in recorded history have combatants rescued so many civilians from enemy territory in the midst of battle.

The Korean Presidential Unit Citation awarded to Captain LaRue and to the ship states that the ship's rescue was a, "true example of Christian faith in action." By special act of the U.S. Congress Captain LaRue and the ship were decorated with the Gallant Ship award for their, "courage, resourcefulness, sound seamanship and teamwork." The Guinness Book of World Records has certified that the Meredith Victory, "had performed the greatest rescue operation ever by a single ship." However the heroic virtue of Captain LaRue can best be recognized in his own words, "I think often of that voyage. I think of how such a small vessel was able to hold so many persons and surmount endless perils without harm to a soul. And as I think, the clear unmistakable message comes to me that on that Christmastide, in the bleak and bitter waters off the shores of Korea, God's own hand was at the helm of my ship."

In 1954 Captain LaRue left the sea and joined the Order of Saint Benedict as a monk at St. Paul's Abbey, Newton, NJ where he took the name Brother Marinus, in honor of Mary, Mother of God. In October 2000 plans were made to close the Abbey because only a handful of monks were remaining. However the leadership of the Benedictine Congregation to which St. Paul's Abbey belonged contacted Waegwan Abbey in Korea to help restore St. Paul's. On 12 October 2001 Waegwan agreed to help. Two days later Brother Marinus died at the age of 87. Two months later the Korean monks arrived and quickly set about restoring St. Paul's. It seemed a providential return of a humanitarian favor performed a half century earlier. Indeed a tale of salvation of how Korean monks returned a favor and saved a monastery. By divine providence Brother Marinus worked two rescues the rescue of 14,000 Korean refugees and by his prayers helped rescue St. Paul's Abbey.

Recently The Apostleship of the Sea has begun the process of introducing the cause of Brother Marinus to the Congregation of Saints. In addition to his Korean War service Brother Marinus was a WWII merchant marine veteran. His life demonstrated his courage, humility, his love of his fellow man and his holiness. As Most Reverend Arthur J. Serratelli, Bishop of Paterson, has written, in part, "I do not think it is a coincidence that Captain LaRue saved 14,000 Korean refugees and decades later Brother Marinus's Abbey is saved from closing by the arrival of Korean monks. This cannot be considered just a coincidence but the work of Our Lord."