

AMERICAN MERCHANT MARINE VETERANS

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The Ship of Miracles



Captain Leonard P. LaRue
SS Meredith Victory



PEACE AND WAR



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THE UNTOLD STORY OF THE *SS VIRGINIA VICTORY* IN KOREA

Submitted by Ned Forney

In December of 2015 I had the good fortune of meeting Bob Lunney, an officer who served aboard *SS Meredith Victory* during its historic 1950 voyage from the North Korean port of Hun-



gnam to Goeje Island, South Korea. Bob had been invited to Seoul to participate in the opening ceremony of The Museum of Contemporary Korean History's "65th Anniversary of the Hungnam Evacuation" Exhibit, and as a writer living in South Korea researching the Korean War, I was eager to interview him and hear more about *Meredith Victory's* Captain, Leonard LaRue, and his crew's role in the dramatic rescue of 14,000 North Korean refugees.

I had spent the previous month corresponding with Bob via email, learning as much as I could about *Meredith Victory* and the brave refugees who had left their homes, and in many cases, families, to escape the approaching Communists. These terrified men, women, and children, literally fleeing for their lives, were hoping the Americans would take them South - to freedom - aboard US Navy and Merchant Marine vessels. The more I studied the event, the more fascinated I became; the story seemed almost unbelievable, reminding me of a script from a blockbuster movie, but *it had happened*.

During Bob's short visit to Seoul, I spent hours interviewing him, bombarding him with questions and asking for material that would help me piece together the events that took place during Hungnam's cold, dark days of December 1950. Over the next eight months, we continued to write one another, and thanks to Bob's dedication, meticulous records, and passion for keeping the memory of his Captain and shipmates alive for future generations, I soon had countless documents, articles, letters, pictures, and a copy of the ship's log. He even introduced me to Burley Smith and Merl Smith, the other two surviving officers of *Meredith Victory*, who also graciously allowed me to interview them and provided a wealth of information.

Today, Bob, his wife, Joan, Merl, Burley, and I are friends, and I was privileged to spend a weekend at the Lunney's Bronxville, New York, home this summer for a mini-*Meredith Victory* reunion.

It's been a rewarding year, and with all the knowledge and first-hand accounts I've acquired, I now have a complete story of *Meredith Victory* for a book I'm writing on the Hungnam evacuation and two men - Colonel Edward H. Forney, USMC,

and Dr. Bong-Hak Hyun - who played a significant role in the operation. Throughout my book, I have strived to pay tribute to the dedicated, hard-working, and gallant men of the US Merchant

Marine, and, according to the three officers of *Meredith Victory* who've read the chapters about their ship and provided valuable feedback and suggestions, I have accomplished my goal of telling their story accurately and honorably.

But that's only half the story.

In my detailed research of the evacuation, I discovered that another ship, identical to *Meredith Victory*, with its own courageous Captain and crew, also rescued 14,000 refugees from Hungnam. The official Army X Corps after-action report lists two Merchant Marine ships departing with 14,000 refugees: *SS Meredith Victory* (14,500) and *SS Virginia City Victory* (14,000), and Colonel Forney, the Evacuation Control Officer, also makes reference to the ships in his report. I was immediately intrigued. How was it that I had never heard about *Virginia City Victory*?

After months of searching government archives, reviewing Merchant Marine publications and documents, and requesting information from the US Merchant Marine Academy, I came up empty handed. I then contacted the American Merchant Marine Veterans, where Christopher Edyvean introduced me to Michael Helbig - a painstakingly detailed researcher - who was also fascinated with the story and determined to help me uncover the facts of *Virginia City Victory*.

Unfortunately, after looking tirelessly for months, Michael found only minimal references to the ship's role in the evacuation and was unable to acquire the ship's log. But I continue to be grateful for his dedication to researching the role of *all* Merchant Marine vessels during the Korean War and am optimistic that with his help, the men of *Virginia City Victory*, like those of *Meredith Victory*, will get their due recognition.

I am convinced that through organizations like the American Merchant Marine Veterans and the American public's renewed sense of urgency to document the stories of those who served their country at sea during World War II and the Korean War, the accounts of *Meredith Victory*, *Virginia City Victory*, and hundreds of other ships with similar stories, will become a permanent part of the proud history of the US Merchant Marine.

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