

Opinion

Thoughts of the Times

A man for all seasons

Posted : 2022-03-22 16:20
Updated : 2022-03-22 16:20



By Ned Forney

"It was simply the right thing to do." - J. Robert "Bob" Lunney

It's not often that we hear about someone who does the right thing for the right reasons at the right time. But Bob Lunney pulled it off. Again, and again. And it wasn't by mere luck or circumstance that he made a positive impact on thousands of people. Bob made things happen because he believed that serving others and "helping the least of these" – the words embodied by his parents, teachers, and Merchant Marine captain Leonard LaRue – were the ultimate calling in life.



During Bob Lunney's rewarding and beautiful life he was constantly on the lookout for the underdog, men and women who had been dealt a tough blow, who carried a heavy cross, or were simply forgotten by society. And when he found them, his Irish stubbornness, wit, and sense of humor took over. Nothing stopped him.

As a devoted son, husband, father, friend, lawyer, US Merchant Marine and Naval officer, he championed causes that were close to his heart. From voter registration drives during the early days of the civil rights movement, to traveling to North Korea to help recover Americans killed during the Korean War, to working tirelessly for 40 years as a board member for Lavelle School for the Blind in Bronx, NY, he never rested.

Just ask his wife, Joan, of 46 years and their son Alex, who frequently traveled with Bob and accompanied him during a trip to Croatia in 2006. Lunney had been invited to a ceremony aboard the USS Enterprise (CVN-65), anchored off the coast of Split, Croatia, honoring Peter Tomich, a U.S. Navy chief who sacrificed his life for his shipmates during the attack on Pearl Harbor and was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor.

In a saga that spanned decades, the Navy was unable to find Tomich's next of kin and the sailor's MOH ended up at the U.S. Navy Museum in Washington, DC. Determined to solve the mystery, Bob spent nine years trying to locate Tomich's relatives in the Balkans, an odyssey that culminated in a ceremony in which an appreciative and proud cousin received the fallen Navy Chief's MOH aboard the USS Enterprise. Lunney's dedication to a fellow American and U.S. Navy veteran had paid off.

I met Lunney in 2016 while doing research for a book I was writing about the Heungnam Evacuation, a little-known military operation that saved more than 104,000 U.S. servicemen and nearly that number of North Korean refugees during the darkest days of the Korean War. Lunney, a 22-year-old World War II Navy veteran at the time, was there and played a part in what would become the largest American military seaborne evacuation of civilians, under combat conditions, in U.S. history.

Bob had joined the Merchant Marines to earn cash for college and had been sent to Korea after the Chinese entered the war in late 1950. As an officer aboard SS Meredith Victory, Lunney worked closely with a man who became one of his lifelong heroes: Captain Leonard LaRue.

"He was calm, confident, and caring," Bob said of the Philadelphia native who would make the decision to load 14,000 refugees aboard his ship at Heungnam, North Korea, a Guinness World Record for the most refugees saved during a single voyage.

Lunney never forgot LaRue and spent decades giving interviews and talks, writing articles, and traveling around the world to pay tribute to his beloved captain and the crew who had helped save so many lives in the bleak winter of 1950.

In my brief time with Bob and Joan at their home in Bronxville, New York, and during our subsequent meetings in South Korea, I was amazed at Bob's loyalty and dedication to the Merchant Marine captain who after the war became a Benedictine monk. I was also impressed with the time he spent with me sharing stories of his life and his many passions and projects.

Bob was a man of strong ideals and convictions, and like so many others who were touched by his long life of 94 years, I am grateful that I knew him as a friend and mentor. I will always remember his thoughtfulness, compassion, and generosity.

With the world watching the shocking and heartbreaking scenes of innocent people being killed and maimed in Ukraine, Bob's message about refugees fleeing during wartime will resonate with millions of people. "The idea of war isn't just about bombs and bad guys. It's also about preserving the integrity of a nation and the dignity of its people."






To J. Robert Lunney (Dec. 15, 1927 - March 22, 2022), a man for all seasons, we salute you.

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