

The 79th anniversary of the sinking of the SS McKeesport

McKeesport to remember ship that bore city's name

It has become a springtime tradition to honor the memory of a ship named for the City of McKeesport that became a casualty of World War II's Battle of the Atlantic.

By **JEFF STITT**
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Tomorrow marks the 79th anniversary of a German submarine firing a torpedo that sank the SS McKeesport Merchant Marine ship.

The city's namesake is credited with bringing aid to millions of people during World War II and its lifetime at sea.

The SS McKeesport Committee in McKeesport is calling on the public to visit The Palisades on Friday to pay tribute to the Merchant Marine vessel during a noon ceremony.

On April 29, 1943, the SS McKeesport, commanded by Capt. Oscar John Lohr, sank approximately 500 miles off the coast of Newfoundland, according to reports from the now-defunct McKeesport Daily News, which was owned by news partners at Trib Total Media.

According to a memorial plaque in the city dedicated to the SS McKeesport, there were 43 Merchant Mariners, 12 of them officers, and 25 armed Naval guards on board.

They all survived the initial attack and were transported to St. John's, Newfoundland, but past McKeesport Daily News articles show John A. Anderson, a Merchant Marine seaman, later died from exposure to the icy water of the Atlantic Ocean.

City Administrator Tom Maglicco — a U.S. Army veteran, a member of the SS McKeesport Committee and a member of the city's Veterans Committee — said memorializing the ship that is the city's namesake is a great point of pride in McKeesport.

But this year's event is going to be a



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The late Augusto Villanueva served as a Merchant Mariner aboard the SS McKeesport when it was hit and sunk by a German torpedo during World War II.

special one.

That's because Jari Villanueva of the Baltimore area recently reached out to Mayor Michael Cherepko to say he'd been going through his late father's military records and the DD214 form stating that during his service, his dad, the late Augusto Villanueva, served aboard the SS McKeesport.

Son of SS McKeesport seaman to speak at Friday's service

Doing research on the ship, Jari Villanueva came across news articles about the city's annual SS McKeesport ceremony.

He is retired from the U.S. Air Force Band and was a bugler at Arlington National Cemetery for 23 years.

"I continue to serve our veterans today with my nonprofit organization TAPS FOR VETERANS," Jari Villanueva said in an emailed letter to the mayor's office.

Maglicco said Jari Villanueva has agreed to give brief remarks Friday and will be a part of sounding "Taps."

"My father was a messman on the SS McKeesport when it was torpedoed and sunk on April 29, 1943," Jari Villanueva wrote to Cherepko, later adding that his father "went onto a career of a seaman for the rest of his life sailing on many vessels until his retirement."

Mayor's Assistant Jennifer Vertullo, a member of the SS McKeesport Committee and a former journalist for the McKeesport Daily News, said Merchant Mariners have spoken at memorial events in the city in the past, but she isn't aware of a time when someone with a direct connection to the ship was present.

"He enlisted in the Coast Guard on March 3, 1943, and then went aboard the ship," Jari Villanueva said of his father and The McKeesport. "He wasn't (on board) long, a month, before it gets torpedoed."

In an interview with the *Mon Valley Independent*, Villanueva said his dad talked to his eight children about being on a ship that was torpedoed, but for years their was confusion about which ship he was aboard at the time.

Augusto Villanueva was born in Peru in 1915, and came to the United States when he was in his 20s, working as a merchant seaman before enlisting as a Merchant Mariner.

"He was a cook. So, you hear people don't like to talk about the war and stuff. Well, my father was not one of those

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By **JOHN RECT**
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Two developer on bringing m ing to Rostraver will have their re quests up for vot Bellevue Par RWS Land Cor peared before th commissioners V to present prelim terials and to d concept behind projects.

Jay Lustig is th of Bellevue Pa the developer be lowbrook Plaz Shop 'n Save is l



INSIDE
50-year members
The McKeesport College Club recognized members with decades of service to the organization. **A3**

Fun on the patio
Foster House II Sports Bar & Grill is celebrating the grand opening of a new outdoor patio. **A11**

SPORTS
Augustine leads Yough
Emma Augustine pitched the Cougars to a win and drove in eight runs to beat Ringgold. **B1**

INDEX
Cipher B7 News
Classified B7-8 Obitu
Comics B5 Opini
Dear Abby B6 Sport
Lotteries A5 Televi

SS McKEESPORT FROM A1

types of soldiers who had great tales of enduring doom," Jari Villanueva said. "He was a sailor who provided food for the sailors on the ship, which was an important duty, of course."

He said Augusto Villanueva told his children when he enlisted, he was given \$50, and with that money he bought clothes and a large suitcase-style trunk.

"He was probably attending to galley duties when the torpedo struck, and so he went and grabbed that trunk when the order came to abandon ship," Jari Villanueva said of his dad. "My father grabbed his trunk, and now this is the cool part, too, he grabbed the ship's cat and threw it in the trunk."

"... According to my father, he said he ended up in the water with the trunk and the cat. ... Fortunately they were not in the water very long, so my father, the trunk and the cat were rescued by a British warship."

Jari said his sister, Beatrice, still has the trunk, but he doesn't know what ever became of the cat after being rescued.

Villanueva said his father had a couple of months of down time before he was called aboard another vessel, and he spent time in New York.

"He said he was in New York City and he was visiting Radio City Music Hall and he saw a newsreel about the sinking of The McKeesport," Villanueva said.

The son went on to say that, "what infuriated him about it was that some officer who was being interviewed said he was the one who saved the ship's cat."

"He was really mad about that and he went and complained but it didn't get anywhere," Villanueva said.

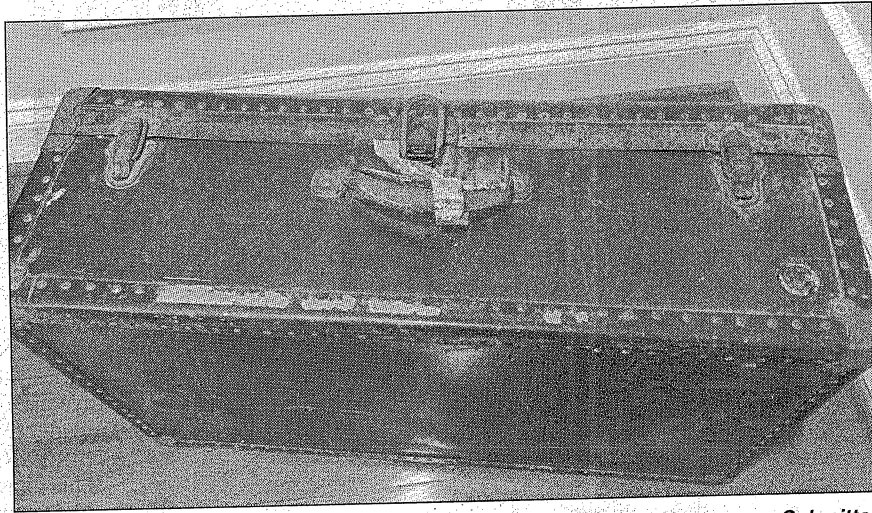
His father went on to serve on three other Liberty Ships and was honorably discharged Aug. 15, 1945.

After that, he became a merchant seaman and retired in the mid-1980s.

"He was incredibly proud to be an American citizen and very proud to have served in the Merchant Marines," Jari Villanueva said. "That was just a huge thing for him. He was really proud of his service."

His dad was a patriot until the day he died.

"In 2001, following the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, he wrote to the Coast Guard offering his services to be placed back on active duty," Jari Villanueva said. "He explained in the letter that he had spent his life living in and serving the United States, he mentions that he survived the sinking of a ship and he felt that he was strong enough to handle the duties of a kitchen in a vessel and also mentioned



Submitted

The late Augusto Villanueva served as a Merchant Mariner aboard the SS McKeesport when it was hit and sunk by a German torpedo during World War II. Before obeying the order to abandon ship, Villanueva grabbed this trunk he bought with \$50 he earned for enlisting to serve aboard the vessel. He is also said to have grabbed the ship's cat and threw it in the trunk to save it from sinking with the ship.

that two of his children were currently on active duty and that he was proud and he was ready to accept any duty that was appropriate to his age."

Augusto Villanueva was 86 at the time. He passed away the next year and was buried in a military cemetery.

Jari Villanueva played "Taps" at his father's funeral and is proud to participate Friday at the SS McKeesport service.

Next year will mark the 80th anniversary of the sinking of the SS McKeesport and the city is already planning a ceremony for Saturday, April 29, 2023.

Jari Villanueva said he and several of his siblings are hoping to attend and they're encouraging families of other veterans who served on the vessel to do the same.

If you're going to the ceremony

Veterans, military families, local officials and area veterans — including those from McKeesport AMVETS Post 8 — are slated to be a part of the memorial service. Doors at the Palisades are slated to open at 11:45 a.m. at the latest. The event is open to the public, but those wishing to attend should call 412-675-5020 ext. 605 to RSVP.

After an indoor service starting at noon, the committee will conduct a wreath ceremony at the McKees Point

Marina and a flag raising at the S.S. McKeesport Memorial along the Great Allegheny Passage trail (across Joe Bendel Way from the Palisades along the Youghiogheny River's banks.) Refreshments will be served.

The keynote speaker Friday will be AMVETS National Third Vice Cmdr. Paul Shipley.

Committee member Mary Ann Goldie said this year's ceremony is also special because it's the first time since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic that the S.S. McKeesport Committee has been able to invite the public and to have an indoor portion of the ceremony.

To ensure the service of the Merchant Mariners who served aboard the S.S. McKeesport were honored amid the pandemic, committee members like Sue Striffler Galaski, Maglicco, Vertullo and Navy veteran Bobbie Billsborrow — wearing masks and practicing social distancing — gathered to raise the green and white "S.S. McKeesport" flag and lay a wreath.

Villanueva is calling on buglers in the Valley to participate in Taps Across America this year.

"We invite thousands of players to play Taps at 3 o'clock (p.m.) on Memorial Day," he said. "That's a program I started. ... It's part of the national pause for remembrance."

For more information go to www.tapsacrossamerica.org.

AHN cancer

The clinics are open to AHN and non-AHN patients, and health insurance is not required.

By KRISTIE J. KLINDEN
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During the COVID-19 pandemic, many cancer patients went without proper medical care, including cancer screening.

The Allegheny Network Cancer Center will offer more free screening events that are open to the public to make it easier for people to get screened.

There will be free breast cancer screening available for both men and women for those age 40 and older. Cervical cancer screening is available for women ages 21 to 65. Free lung cancer screening is available for people with a history of head and neck cancer or anyone age 18 and older with a history of lung cancer from 50 to 80 years old who has smoked or smoked for anyone age 18 and older.

The event is open to AHN and non-AHN patients. Health insurance is not required.

"The five services we offered were booked quickly and we have very well-qualified physicians we want to see this rescheduled. We are very concerned about the possibility of increased number of cancer diagnoses due to missed screenings," said Bartlett, chair of the Cancer Center Institute.

