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Phyllis S memorial brings closure

by Mike Rostad

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Mary Paakhanen and her granddaughter Helen Agik probably had no idea what hit them as they napped in the cabin behind the engine room of the fated mail boat Phyllis S that plied across the Kupreanof Strait toward Polar Bear Rock Light at the west end of Dry Spruce Island.

The mail boat, operated by Capt. Robert Von Scheele, was in the early part of its mail and supply run around Kodiak Island on a crisp, cold Dec. 17, 1942, day, a year after the United States had entered the war.



All hell broke loose when the Navy destroyer Hulbert struck the Phyllis S and cut it in half. The Hulbert, traveling at twice the speed of the Phyllis S, was on its way to the Aleutian Islands.

John Reft and Dan Valley, little boys on the boat, were on their way to the village of Karluk with their moms.

Dan can't remember the incident, but John recalls terrifying moments.

Since the door in the Phyllis S pilothouse was jammed, passengers had to be transported to a rescue skiff through a punched-out skylight.

John hung on to the anchor near the skylight, determined not to get on the rescue skiff until his pregnant

stepmother, Tina Katelnikoff Reft, was pulled to safety by crewmen who had to be very careful so they would not harm her unborn child. It took several attempts before they were able to squeeze her through the port hole.

The rescuers never got to Mary Paakhanen and her granddaughter.

They had been sleeping in the stern part of the boat, which drifted away upon impact.



Never again would Ella Anderson see her beloved mother and daughter. Ella's daughter, Marie Jones, would never see her sister and grandmother again. Ella's children, Bill Anderson, Martha Keegan and Robert Anderson, who were born after 1942, never got to meet them at all.

Mary and Helen were not the only casualties in this tragic incident. Tina Reft's baby, Marlene, died within months after her birth. How could she survive?

The hearings, inquiries, investigations and outpouring of sympathy were not enough to completely rectify the horrible injustice felt by those affected by the disaster.

It needed some kind of closure. That closure came on Memorial Day this spring when representatives of the Sun'aq tribe and the Coast Guard and other concerned citizens traveled to Kupreanof on the cutter SPAR, near the site of the disaster. Father John Dunlop, dean of St. Herman's Seminary in Kodiak, and Father Alexei Knagin, a Port Lions Native who now serves in Cordova, led a memorial service — also called a Panikhida — for the three casualties. Reft, Valley, Keegan and Robert Anderson were part of the entourage.

Shortly before the ceremony, a Coast Guard helicopter hovered over the water while a rescue swimmer dropped a wreath of flowers in memory of the departed.

The commemoration at Kupreanof was a result of months of planning between members of Sun'aq Tribe and the Coast Guard.

While in Juneau attending an Alaska Native consultation and cultural communications course for the Coast Guard, Sun'aq officer Gary Watson talked with Joel Casto, Coast Guard tribal liaison officer, and Capt. William Deal, commanding officer of the air station in Kodiak, about the need for the two entities to develop a closer relationship. He invited the men to attend a tribal council meeting in Kodiak.

At the meeting, Reft, who is also on the Sun'aq board, talked about the Phyllis S incident.

“That's the first I heard about it,” Deal said. “It is a moving story. Nobody from the Navy or the Coast Guard or anybody else had done anything about it. I started looking into it to see what we could do.”

Deal felt compelled to do something before the Coast Guard moved forward in planning this summer's celebration of the 70th anniversary of the establishment of the naval base on Kodiak Island.

“It's not right to let this go unrecognized,” he said.

Malutin, who is a Sun'aq tribe board member, suggested the memorial service at Kupreanof.

Casto asked his superior if he had a boat available on Memorial Day. He said the buoy tender SPAR could be used for the operation.

The men coordinated with memorial service project officers Lt. Cmdr. Adam Bentley, Lt. Tracy Torba and Morgan Way, operations officer for the SPAR, as well as the tender's captain, Lt. Cmdr. Keith Roppella and his crew.

Although the Memorial Day Panikhida didn't have the solemnity of a service held for someone who had died recently, the unchanging atmosphere seemed to weld the time of the tragedy to the present. Not much has changed since the accident. The seagulls cry plaintively over the waters; the surrounding mountains remain the same.

The haunting strains sung by the small choir of Orthodox faithful would have been familiar to the grieving people in 1942.

After the service, which was held on the large deck of the SPAR, people reflected on the significance of the event.

"I was very pleased with the effort," Casto said. "We accomplished what we set out to do which was to come together as friends."

Deal said he was grateful to John Reft for "sharing his painful memories, for helping me understand the circumstances surrounding the tragedy. Although many years have passed, the pain is still fresh for John and many others. While there is little that I can do — little that any of us can do — to fix the mistakes that were made that day, we can share the burden of remembering.

"We share the responsibility of remembering two of God's children that I never had the privilege of meeting."

Malutin thanked the Coast Guard for its part in bringing closure to the 1942 tragedy and for the sacrifices its brave men and women continue to make.

"Every time my wife and I hear a helicopter, we pray for their safety," he said.

Malutin talked about other sacrifices, too. The officers and the crew of the SPAR spent Memorial Day away from their families to be part of the service.

Keegan thanked Sun'aq and the Coast Guard for keeping the memory of her loved ones alive.

"Lowering the wreath was a heart-felt, touching moment," she said. "I appreciate it all."

Teri Boskofsky, Knagin's aunt and relative of Tina Katelnikoff Reft, said the trip was "totally awesome. I was happy to have witnessed this."

"This was definitely meant to be," said Knagin.

Besides honoring the three victims of the Phyllis S tragedy, the memorial service extended to those who died while serving the United States in the military, he said.

“This is an historical moment to bring healing to a broken situation,” said Dunlop. “It shows the good will of the Coast Guard to rectify mistakes that were made. This was a healing moment for the community as a whole.”

Healing certainly came to Reft, one of the few remaining survivors of the fated Phyllis S that day.

Reft admitted that he had harbored hatred and angst because of the 1942 tragedy.

“But now it’s over,” he said. “It’s over, thanks to the Coast Guard.”

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