

Local vet commemorates 50 years since ship sank

By STEVE SMITH
Times Staff Writer

On that August night 50 years ago Herschel McCoy had been directed to repair a switch.

It was one which was used when his ship was in enemy waters, and it would shut off lights anytime a door to the outside would be opened up.

"I fixed it, but I never knew if I was successful," he now recalls.

That was because his ship sank later that night only about 15 minutes after hitting a mine.

Today is Veterans Day, a time for Americans to recall the sacrifices of those who have served their country.

On Aug. 27, 1952 McCoy was stationed on the USS *Sarsi*, a sea-going fleet tugboat commissioned in World War II and which he had been aboard for six weeks.

The *Sarsi* was one of five American ships (the other four were minesweepers) sunk during the Korean War.

But ask him what Veterans Day means to him, and he will say "I realize what I went through is nothing compared to what a lot" of other veterans – the ones who served at places like Normandy and Iwo Jima – endured.

"They're really the true heroes, as far as I'm concerned," he remarked.

"It's always nice to know people have appreciated what you did and went through, but those guys are the ones I really hold up."

During the day, McCoy recalled, minesweepers would clean out harbor areas and then use buoys to mark those areas.

The *Sarsi* was carrying the buoys and the big blocks of cement used to anchor them, he said, and was also on patrol to try to keep North Korean sampan boats from laying more mines at night.

A few weeks earlier, he recalled, there had been a typhoon, and it has been speculated even though the *Sarsi* was in an area which was supposed to have been swept clear of mines it struck one which had been broken loose by the typhoon and had floated out to where it was not thought it could be.

At about 11:45 that night, McCoy recalled, he had just gotten into his bunk rack; he did not hear anything like an explosion, but he felt a movement which told him something was going on.

He thought perhaps the *Sarsi* was taking on fuel from a tanker, and so he put on his shoes and clothes to go watch the process, something he had never seen.

McCoy said he was just getting ready to go topside when someone stuck their head down into his compartment and called out "get the hell out of here – we're sinking."

He was supposed to go to the mess hall to get a life jacket and then proceed to the officers quarters to secure port holes so no light would be getting out of the ship.

However, McCoy continued, when he stepped through a door he also stepped into about a foot of water.

"I thought 'that's not too good,' so I backed out of there and went outside," he recalled.

It probably took him less than five minutes to get topside, McCoy said – but by the time he got there the bow of the *Sarsi* was already under water.

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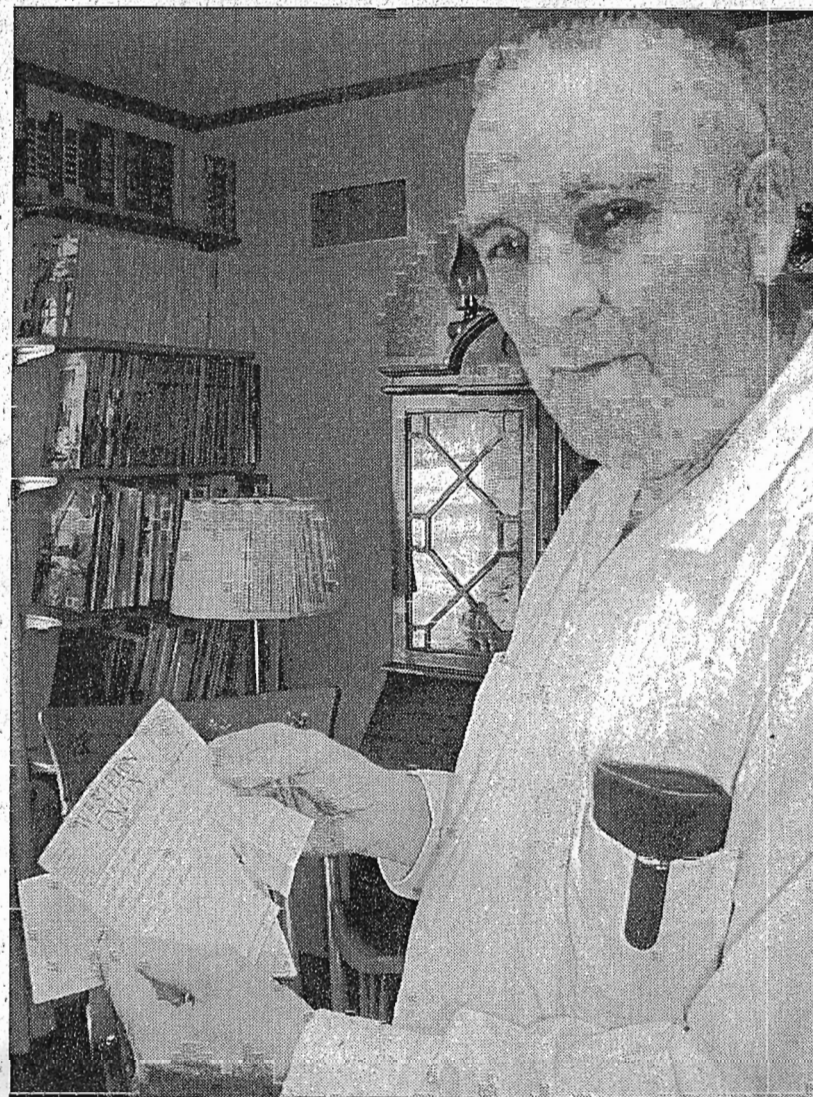
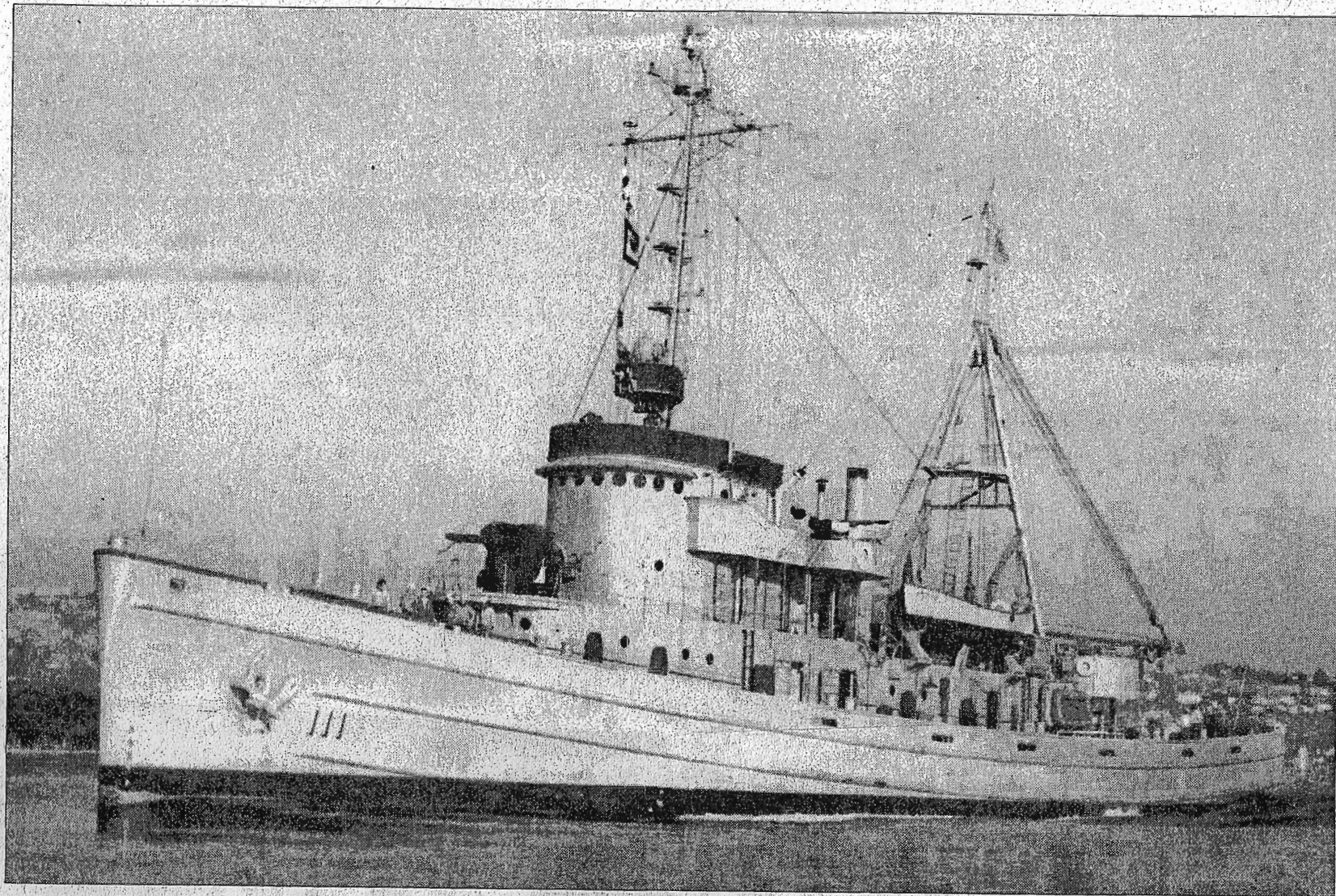


photo by Steve Smith

Herschel McCoy looks at the telegram which his family received after his ship, the USS *Sarsi*, struck a mine and sunk off the coast of North Korea in August of 1952. Originally the telegram was to arrive immediately after the loss of the ship, but there was a problem and those messages had to be sent again. That resulted in his family receiving word about the ship before they were able to learn he was all right.



In top photo is the USS Sarsi, aboard which Herschel McCoy served until it was sunk off the coast of North Korea in August of 1952. Lower photo was taken of McCoy aboard the oiler USS Platte enroute to Sasebo, Japan after he had been rescued following the sinking of his ship. *courtesy photos*

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and the big blocks of cement on the ship's fantail (the aft portion of a Navy vessel) were starting to slide forward toward where he was standing.

the *Sarsi's* crew members filled out telegrams which they were told would get to their families before news of the ship's sinking got into the newspapers.



on the ship's fantail (the aft portion of a Navy vessel) were starting to slide forward toward where he was standing.

"Anyone who was right there immediately jumped into the water," McCoy said; but actually, he added, "I was pretty lucky" — he was a non-swimmer and had grabbed the next-to-last life jacket in his compartment.

He made his way through the water to get away from the ship and keep from being pulled down by the suction of its sinking.

Someone helped him into a liferaft. For the next four hours he was in the raft, then got out into the water and hung onto the raft so that someone else who had been in that position could get in.

At the time the *Sarsi* went down, McCoy recalled, it was only about two miles off the shore of North Korea — close enough to see truck lights on the beach.

With the tide coming in, he remarked, "we knew they were waiting for us," so the people in the rafts had to paddle out to sea all night long to keep from winding up in the hands of the North Koreans.

At about 8 a.m. the following morning, McCoy said, a helicopter flew over, and not long after that a minesweeper came in and picked him up.

Of the 97 men aboard the *Sarsi* that night, McCoy said, five were lost when it sunk.

While it is known four of them were killed, he said, it is not known for certain what happened to the fifth man.

"Someone remembers seeing him swimming toward shore," he recalled, "so we don't know whether he was captured or drowned — but he didn't make it, either."

The first day after being picked up, McCoy said,

out telegrams which they were told would get to their families before news of the ship's sinking got into the newspapers.

"A couple of days later they came around and said there was a little mess-up and we had to do it again," he recalled.

This time, he said, they had to pay for the telegram (which he still has) — and it ended up being three days before his mother, wife and family actually found out he was safe.

In the meantime, McCoy said, news of the *Sarsi's* sinking had made its way into the newspapers.

"I understand my mother's hair turned quite a bit grayer in those three days," he recalled.

Now a Skelly-Getty-Texaco retiree (he worked there for 36 years), McCoy said going through an experience like the sinking of the *Sarsi* "makes you appreciate things a lot more" — particularly when he thinks about six children, many grandchildren and now three great-children who would not have been had he not survived.

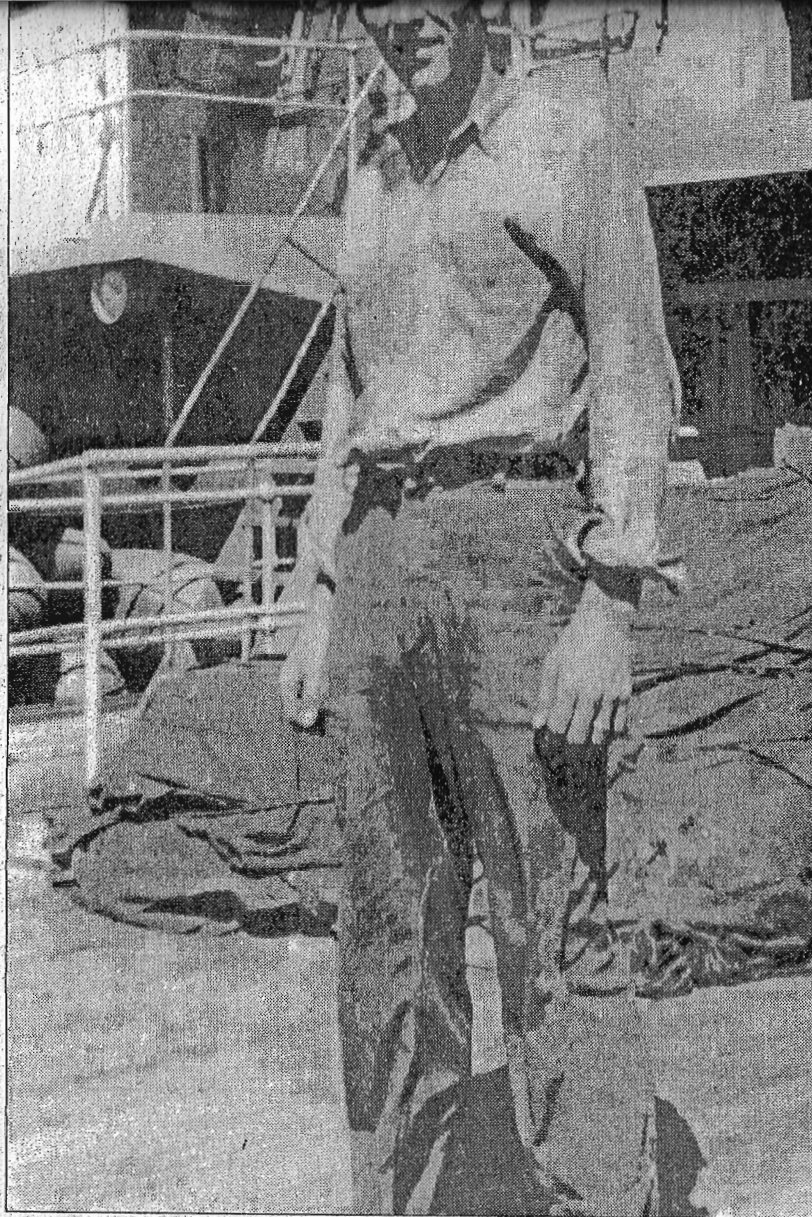
"That night the water I never once thought about dying," McCoy remarked, adding his main concern was about his family back home learning he was all right before reading about the *Sarsi's* sinking in the newspaper.

"You can do a lot of praying in eight hours," he recalled — and he did.

During the day on the date of the *Sarsi's* sinking, McCoy recalled, there had been sharks in the area.

During the four hours he spent hanging onto the side of the liferaft, he said, he was wondering if his bare feet were going to look like fishbait to a prowling shark.

However, he added, there were also porpoises in the area that day — and they have been known to keep sharks away from



people in the water.

"We've always kind of felt like that might have had a little bit to do with" no sharks coming in after the surviving crew members, he said.

McCoy said one other bit of fate contributed to his surviving the sinking of the *Sarsi*.

He had gone aboard the ship with a sailor from Plains, Kan.

There was just one empty bunk that night, he recalled; he

lost a coin flip and slept on a cot.

The next day, McCoy said, the master-at-arms came around and said one of them would have to go sleep up in the officers' quarters.

"He said 'the beds up there are much nicer. I have seniority on you, so I'm going up there and you can have my bunk.'"

"When the mine hit, it hit right where he was at. Nobody knows what happened to him."