



MAY 2014

LIFE & TIMES

A MAGAZINE WITH SENIOR FLAIR

MERCER
COUNTY
HONORS THOSE
WHO SERVED

INSIDE: Why passion has a pulse ✨ Sharpsville's monumental gratitude



The **Mercer Memorial Day 500** honors veterans who give us the freedom to enjoy the rest of the days of the year

A STAR-SPANGLED 'THANKS'

THE MERCER MEMORIAL DAY 500 takes place on a sunny spring morning that organizers are quick to point out is not a holiday. Instead, they insist, it's a day to recognize the service and sacrifice that gives Americans the freedom to enjoy the other 364 days of the year.

Each year a handful of local military veterans is singled out for special honors during a day of events on the picturesque streets of the county seat, which are lined with the namesake 500 flags. There's a parade, a 5K race, entertainment, a military expo and concessions.

This year the five honorees are a combination of the old and new. Their history goes back more than 70 years. One honoree remains on duty.

First Sgt. James Masotto is with the U.S. Air

Force Reserves and has been sent to the Republic of Kyrgyzstan, Baghdad in Iraq and Kandahar in Afghanistan. He also helps his fellow men and women in uniform by seeing that they get phone cards to call home. He's involved with local Veterans of Foreign Wars and American Legion posts in sending veterans from all branches of the service on trips to see national war memorials in Washington, D.C.

John J. Takoch Sr. served in the U.S. Army from 1942 to 1945 in the European Theater during World War II. His railroad battalion was responsible for clearing the rails and supplying the troops of Gen. George S. Patton. He also saw action in the Battle of the Bulge at Bastogne.

His fellow soldier and veteran of the Battle of the Bulge, **Robert T. Bruce**, is being honored posthumously. Serving in the Asiatic Pacific, Aleutian Islands, Bruce also saw action in the European Theater and was captured Dec. 22, 1944, by the Germans in the thick of the Battle of the Bulge.

Wounded during the battle, he endured harsh treatment as a prisoner of war and suffered numerous maladies until he was rescued by the Allied forces at the end of the war.

Phillip Schneider was deployed with the Marines to Vietnam in January 1969. Seeing action in the second Tet Offensive, he and his platoon guarded a vital bridge to the war effort. Badly wounded, he was the sole survivor from his squad and was hospitalized for six months.

Robert John Kelly "Jack" Craig is being honored posthumously for his service in the U.S. Merchant Marine during World War II. His ship, the American tanker S.S. Fort Lee, was sunk by the Germans in the Indian Ocean on Nov. 2, 1944. Craig's brother believes Jack was among the three survivors who made an epic 2,850-mile journey aboard a lifeboat.

Full biographies of the honorees and a schedule of events appear on the following pages.

Stories by **Michael Rohnick**



Last year's honorees ride through an avenue of flags along South Pitt Street in Mercer.

David E. Dale/Life & Times file



Cpl. T-5 John J. Takoch Sr.
U.S. Army
World War II

JOHN J. TAKOCH SR. OF SHARON served in the U.S. Army from 1942 to 1945 in the European Theater during World War II.

His unit, Company A, 718th and 726th Railway Operat-

ing Battalions, transported heavy equipment and rebuilt roadways and railways in Northern France and the Rhineland. The battalion was responsible for clearing the rails and supplying the troops of Gen. George S. Patton.

Fighting in the Battle of the Bulge at Bastogne, Takoch experienced all the dangers and perils that every other soldier endured in battle and he knew that his life could have been taken in any of those battles.

He recalls the stench of death in the concentration camps their battles liberated and still tells his children and grandchildren: "Never forget."

In his 90 years, he has never forgotten.

"Many children today will never know what men and women of the armed forces went through so they might enjoy their freedom," said Takoch, a native of Uniontown, Pa.

"Hundreds of thousands of men and women have given their lives and suffered untold sacrifices in the many wars our country has been involved in so that battles such as these never touch our shores."

Takoch earned these medals:



Cpl. T-5 John J. Takoch Sr.

- ▶ Good Conduct Medal
- ▶ Meritorious Unit Citation while in the 718th Railway Operating Battalion
- ▶ American Campaign Medal
- ▶ European-African-Middle Eastern Campaign Medal with four Bronze Stars – one for the Battle of the Bulge at Bastogne
- ▶ World War II Victory Medal.

His most recent was The French Diplome in appreciation for his participation in the liberation of France. The French Consulate to the United States, Jean-Pierre Masseret, presented it in July 2002 in a ceremony at Pittsburgh's Soldiers and Sailors Museum.

On April 18, Takoch lost his wife of 67 years, Marian, who also proudly served her country during World War II with the Civil Air Patrol.

Together, they were the parents of two sons, John J. Takoch Jr., who is married to Diane, Annville, Pa.; and Christopher D. Takoch, who is married to Dana, Hermitage; and three daughters, Roberta A., wife of Edward Anton, West Middlesex; Loretta "Lori" M., wife of Bert Weston, Mercer; and Marian "Mimi" J., wife of Jose Prada, Hermitage. Lori and Mimi are widely known in the area for their work with Community Food Warehouse of Mercer County; Lori is the agency's executive director and Mimi is its public relations coordinator.

The Takoches were blessed with 12 grandchildren and 18 great-grandchildren. Two more great-grandchildren are due this summer.

Takoch is also a member of Veterans of Foreign Wars Hickory Post 6166, Hermitage.



First Sgt. James Masotto
U.S. Air Force
U.S. Air Force Reserve
Middle East

JAMES MASOTTO OF SHARON has a lengthy background in the U.S. Air Force and has served overseas in the Republic of Kyrgyzstan, Baghdad in Iraq and Kandahar in Afghanistan.

Masotto hails from a family with a long tradition in the military. His great-great-great-grandfather, Louis Brest, was awarded the Medal of Honor for his service during the Civil War and is buried in Mercer.

Masotto's son, Cody, is a C-17 engine mechanic with the Air Force, stationed at McChord Air Force Base in Lakewood, Wash.

Sgt. Masotto joined the Air Force in November 1986 and served through 1990. From 1991 through 1994, he served in the Pennsylvania Air National Guard.

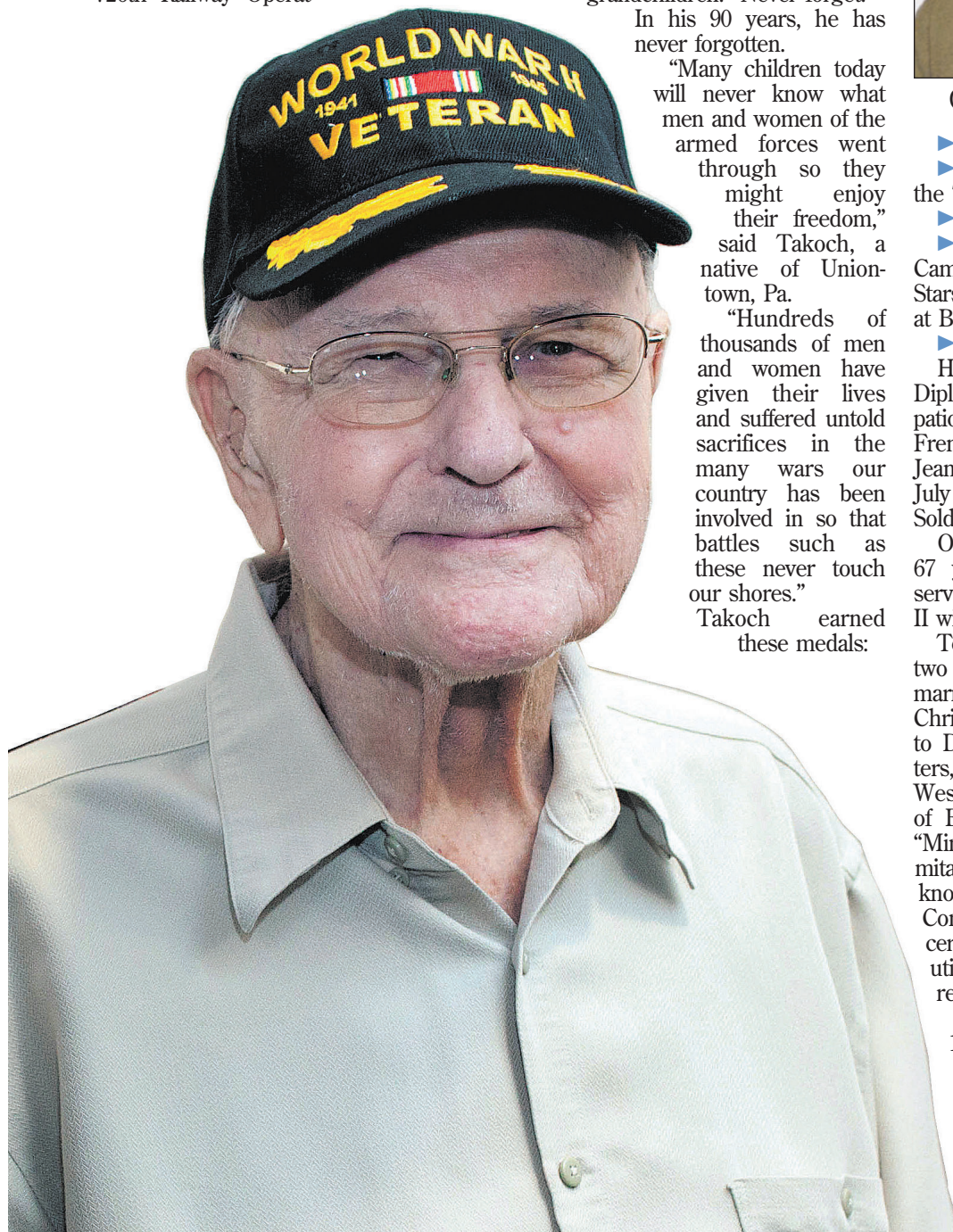
He has been with the Air Force Reserve since 2005, based at the 76th Aerial Port Squadron at the Youngstown Air Reserve Station. In 2013 he was named "First Sergeant of the Year."

Masotto has been deployed to the Middle East three times: in 2007 to Manas Air Base, Republic of Kyrgyzstan; in 2009 to Baghdad, Iraq; and in 2010 to Kandahar, Afghanistan. A U.S. flag he found on State Street in Sharon traveled with him to Iraq and Afghanistan.

A 1994 graduate of the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections Academy, Masotto worked for a time at the State Correctional Institution at Mercer in Findley Township.

He later attended Mercyhurst Police Academy and was hired by the city of Sharon as a member of its police force. He was named "Officer of the Year" in 1997 and served as DARE officer, Taser instructor and field training officer.

In addition to his duties with the Air Force Reserve, Masotto remains committed to helping veterans. He is the junior vice commander for Shenango Valley Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 1338. In that role he is known throughout the area for sending veterans from all branches of the service on trips to see national war memorials in Washington, D.C., as a way of thanking them for their service to their country.





Contributed

Jim Masotto sits on a rack of bombs on a plane at Kandahar Airfield in 2010. He worked minimum 12-hour days as an aerial porter overseeing cargo on the base in Afghanistan.

Those all-expense paid trips are sponsored by VFW Post 1338 and American Legion Post 299. The two Sharon veterans clubs pool their resources to find candidates and a companion to send to see the memorials.

"Our veterans clubs give so much to the community," Masotto said. "They'd do anything for a veteran."

For Masotto's work in the community, Sharon Rotary Club named him its "John Fabian Person of the Year" in 2010.

A 1982 graduate of Sharon High School, he and his wife, Linda, are both lifelong residents of Sharon. In addition to Cody, they have another son, Jordon.



Jason Kapusta/Life & Times file

Jim Masotto wore this hat in Iraq and Afghanistan. Inside the brim he made a mark for every dead soldier they sent home.



Mercer Memorial Day 500

What you need to know about the 2014 Mercer Memorial Day 500, a day of events saluting veterans and patriotism

- ▶ **WHEN/WHERE:** 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. May 26 in and around Courthouse Square in Mercer.
- ▶ **INFO:** www.mercermemorialday500.org; Ed and Sharon Dittrich at 724-977-4684 or srmmpc6@gmail.com
- ▶ **2014 HONOREES:**
 - Air Force Reserve Sgt. James Masotto (Middle East)
 - Army Cpl. T-5 John J. Takoch Sr. (World War II)
 - Marine Corps Lance Cpl. Phillip Schneider (Vietnam)
- ▶ **2014 POSTHUMOUS HONOREES:**
 - Army Pfc. Robert T. Bruce (World War II)
 - Robert John Kelly "Jack" Craig (Merchant Marine, World War II)
- ▶ **MAIN EVENTS:**

8:30 a.m. – 5K Race Through the Flags (Register at 8 a.m. at the Mercer Post Office)

9 a.m. – Opening ceremony; race winners announced; honoree introductions. (Courthouse Bandstand)

9 to 11 a.m. – Military expo (north side of courthouse)

9:30 a.m. to noon – Concessions available

10 to 11 a.m. – Entertainment by Brett Allen Morgan. (Courthouse Bandstand)

11 a.m. – Memorial Parade (Pitt Street from Venango to South streets)

Noon – Memorial salute (Three blocks south of courthouse at end of parade route.)





Lance Cpl. Phillip Schneider

U.S. Marine Corps
Vietnam War

PHILLIP SCHNEIDER JOINED THE MARINES in July 1968. He was 19.

Originally from Sharon, and later of Grove City and Carlton, Schneider completed boot camp at Parris Island, S.C., and was deployed to Vietnam in January 1969.

En route to Southeast Asia aboard a civilian airliner,

Schneider said he began to realize the level of danger that awaited him and his brothers-in-arms. As the plane entered Vietnamese airspace, phantom jets were positioned on either side to escort the airliner to the Da Nang airstrip.

Only a few days after landing, the action heated up and sandbag bunkers became an all-too-familiar place of cover. The Viet Cong and North Vietnam regulars were everywhere.

"There wasn't a day go by that someone I knew was wounded or killed," Schneider said.

In early 1969, the second Tet Offensive was in full swing. Schneider's platoon was assigned to secure and guard a bridge that was vital to the war effort. It was

a main pipeline of supplies needed by the war effort.

Schneider recalled being relieved from guard duty about 2 a.m. one day and going into the bunker to try sleep for a few hours, although a pesky rat as big as a small dog kept running back and forth across him as he tried to grab a few winks. Schneider decided to sleep outside behind the bunker.

His next memory is hearing voices of Viet Cong troops as they moved through the area they had just ravaged with RPG and B40 rockets.

Badly injured and covered in blood, Schneider lay still pretending to be dead until the enemy left the area. It was then he realized he couldn't move and there were no other survivors from his squad.

He, alone, had survived, but with a traumatic head injury and shrapnel wounds to his side, hip and leg.

Soon, Marines from other squads across the river and at the other end of the bridge were loading him into a medical helicopter.

After four days, he awoke from a coma to paralysis of his right side. After six months in a hospital in Philadelphia, he was sent home "whole, but broken."

"I see guys in wheelchairs, with legs and arms missing, and I thank God I'm alive. If it wasn't for that rat waking me up I wouldn't be here right now," he said.

Schneider received a Bronze Star and a Purple Heart for his sacrifices and efforts during the Vietnam War.

"My goal is to keep working toward getting back to normal, but I don't think there will ever be a real normal as it once was for any man or woman who served in a time of war," he said.

Schneider has a daughter, Amy, who is married to Matt Polinski, of Tampa, Fla.; and two sons, Nick and Phillip P. Schneider, both of Grove City.

This snapshot of Phillip Schneider was taken in Vietnam in early 1969 when his platoon was assigned to secure and guard a bridge that was part of a vital supply line. Later that same night he was severely wounded during an enemy attack. No one else from his squad survived.

Contributed



Lance Cpl. Phillip Schneider





Pfc. Robert T. Bruce

U.S. Army – World War II

(posthumous honoree)

PFC. ROBERT T. BRUCE ENTERED THE U.S. Army in June of 1941 and served in the Asiatic Pacific, Aleutian Islands, Rhineland and Ardennes.

Injured during the Battle of the Bulge, Bruce was captured on Dec. 22, 1944. He was one of more than 1,100 military personnel captured by the Germans during that period.

In addition to his war injuries, Bruce endured mistreatment during his time in the Prisoner of War camp at Stalag 4B.

David Bathory of Sharpville remembers his uncle's stories of the life he and other captives led while imprisoned by the Germans.

"Uncle Bob's weight went down to a mere 100 pounds and he underwent psychological torture," Bathory said. "His medical records obtained after his death revealed that he had no news from home and feared frequently for his life and had prolonged periods of cold, causing frostbite. He

endured frequent attacks while on "forced marches" and periods of captivity in railroad cars that were under shellings."

During his captivity he suffered pneumonia, dysentery, partial blindness, hearing disorders, sores from neglect, swollen joints, difficulty walking and nightmares from psychological torture.

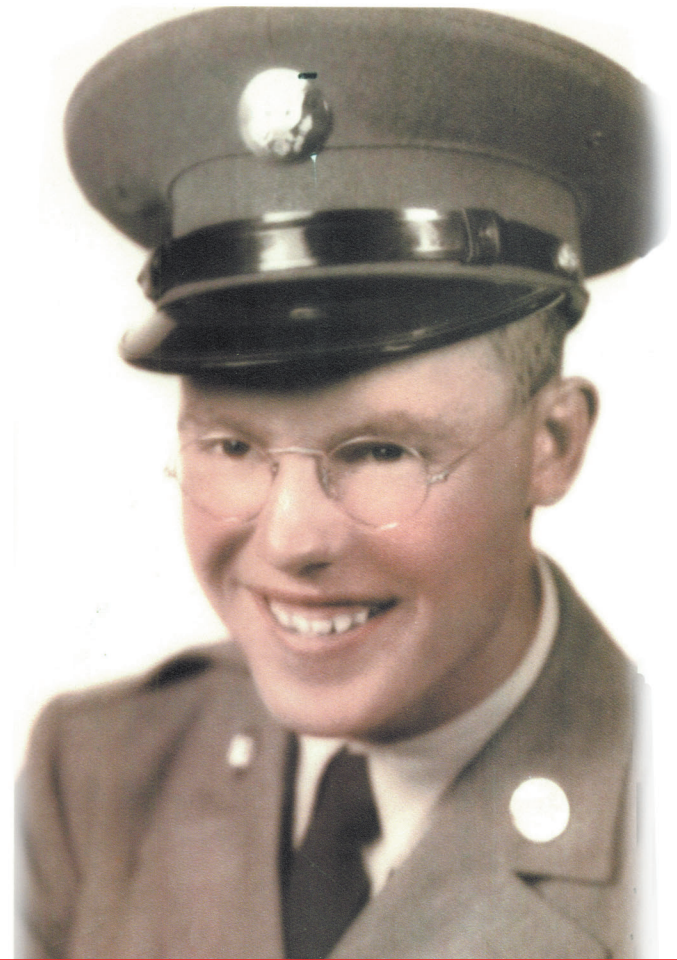
In May 1945, Bruce and many of his comrades were rescued by the British.

When asked by U.S. Army doctors after his return to the United States what he felt was the most important lesson he had learned during his captivity, Bruce replied, "I learned what freedom really meant."

In addition to the Battle of the Bulge, Bruce served in many significant World War II battles – in the Asiatic Pacific, Aleutian Islands and Rhineland.

He earned a Bronze Star for his valor and was awarded a Purple Heart for his wounds.

Bruce, who died in May 1995, is survived by his wife, Esther Bruce, who still lives in Hubbard; his daughter, Maryanne Wilcox, Pekin, Ill.; and several nieces and nephews, including Bathory.



Pfc. Robert T. Bruce

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Robert John Kelly "Jack" Craig

U.S. Merchant Marine
World War II

(posthumous honoree)

ROBERT JOHN KELLY CRAIG graduated from the former Fredonia High School and enlisted in June 1943 in the U.S. Merchant Marine to do his part in World War II.

Known by friends and family as "Bobby Jack" or "Jack," he was a fireman water tender, one of 46 Merchant crew aboard the American Tanker S.S. Fort Lee.

"One of his buddies, Homer Gibson, had a brother who graduated several years before they did and he joined the Maritime Service, and so did they," recalled Craig's younger brother, Richard of Mercer.

Craig was aboard the Fort Lee on Nov. 2, 1944. It was en route from Abadan, Iran, to Brisbane, Australia, its hold filled with fuel, when the Germans torpedoed it in the Indian Ocean.

Naval records show the first torpedo struck the port quarter of the Fort Lee under the boiler at 8 a.m., flooding the fire room and killing two men.

Within 18 minutes, a second torpedo struck the starboard side, damaging the engine room and striking just below two lifeboats as they were being lowered. Seven shipmates died in the blast and the others were plucked from the sea by survivors in other lifeboats.

It took less than an hour for the Fort Lee to sink.

Four lifeboats launched successfully. Three were rescued by other ships on Nov. 5; the fourth drifted out of sight, presumably lost at sea.

Richard Craig said he recalls coming home from school to hear his mother's words: "Your brother has been lost at sea!"

The fate of the men on that lifeboat was learned 57 years later through the work of an Australian researcher; the U.S. Army Central Identification Laboratory at Hickam Air Force Base in Hawaii; the U.S. Coast Guard-Marine Personnel Section in Arlington, Va.; and the National Archives.

The men aboard that lifeboat took an epic voyage of 2,850 miles across open water.

Written records reveal the lifeboat landed on Soemba Island, Indonesia, on Jan. 13, 1945. Three of the 16 men aboard were still alive.

According to Japanese and native reports, one man died immediately after the landing and the two others were taken as prisoners and transferred to a



Contributed

A photograph of the last time the Craig family was together, May 22, 1944. Jack left Mercer the next day by bus.

Japanese Naval Stockade.

War crimes investigation reports suggest the two survivors were executed in March or April of 1945.

It will never be known if Craig survived to land on Soemba Island, only to be executed, or if he was one of the 13 who died at sea during those 72 days of traveling.

Craig believes his older brother made it Soemba Island because Jack was in such excellent shape.

"He was only 19 years old and he was my hero. It's been 60 long years piecing together the information that gives some closure as to what fate my brother faced in his final days.

"He is now recognized for his efforts and service to his community and country," by the Mercer Memorial 500, Craig said. ♦



Merchant Mariner Jack Craig



Jack Craig, left, poses for a May 1944 photo with his good friend and classmate Owen Willman. They were two of the three friends known as the Three Musketiers. Jack was president of the 1943 senior class of Fredonia High School.

