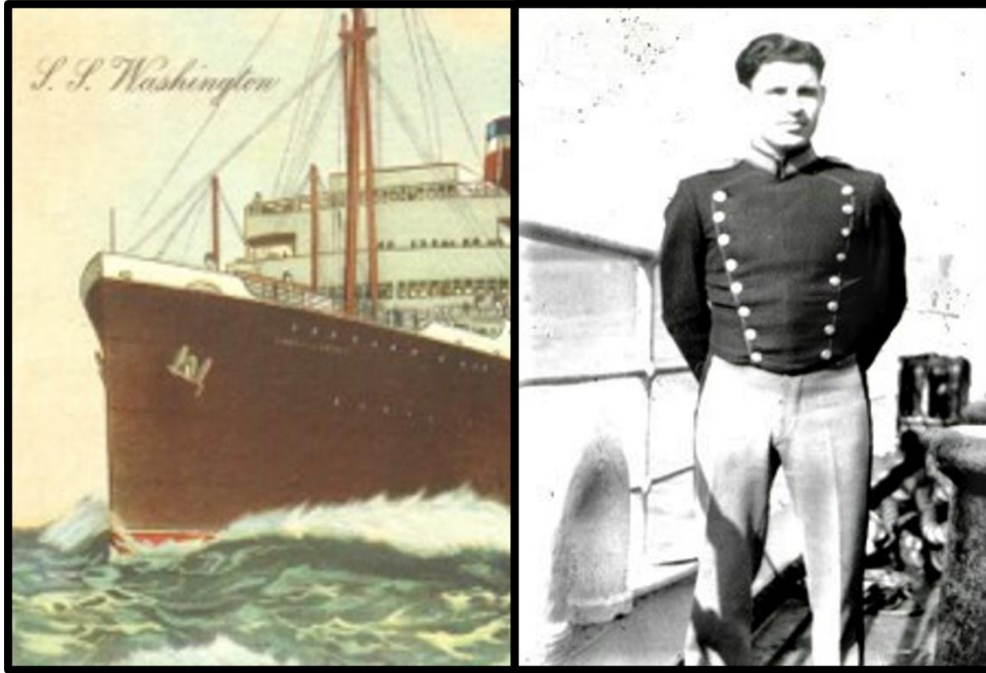


# **This Week in Saratoga County History**

## **Saratoga Man's role in the Evacuation of Americans from Europe**

**Submitted by Mike Murray, June 21, 2023**



**The SS Washington and Paul Phillips**

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Over 100,000 Americans were traveling or residing in Europe in 1939. As the threat of war became ever more ominous, in August the United States Department of State created a new office to facilitate the evacuation of these Americans. The war began with Germany's invasion of Poland on September 1. By the end of the year 75% of the Americans in Europe were either home or on their way home. Many American ships and men were involved in this evacuation. One of those sailors was my uncle.

Paul Joseph Phillips was born in Saratoga Springs on October 26 1912. Paul's father died when he was 9 years old. His mother, Rose, was left to raise and care for 7 children between the ages of 15 and 2. Rose and her 7 children grew to be a very close , supportive family. Paul graduated from Saratoga Springs High School in 1929, and like many high school graduates of the depression era, he had no firm plan for his future. After graduation, Paul clerked for his uncle, John Phillips, who was a cigar maker and ran a cigar shop on Broadway. Paul, also, played baseball as a pitcher for the county's twi-light league, Saratoga Athletic Club. The records show he won over half the

games he pitched. Paul was also very involved with the local theatre group, Saratoga Community Players, performing, building sets and acting in their productions in the City Hall Theatre.

Paul was hired in 1933 as a bellman by the United States Steamship Lines on the S.S. Manhattan. Paul was promoted to steward in 1937 and moved to the recently launched S.S. Washington. The Washington's route was New York to Hamburg, Le Havre, Southampton, Cobh and home. Paul, again was promoted in 1938 to assistant clerk to the Purser, and was working in this capacity in 1939.

The S.S. Washington's initial voyage of 1939 was the liner's standard route, first stop Hamburg. In Hamburg 90 German Jews boarded the ship fleeing Germany. These passengers left the ship in Southampton. The next voyage the route changed, Naples and Genoa, Italy, Le Havre, France, Southampton, England, Galway Bay, Ireland and home. By mid-summer, with the unrest increasing, the stops in Italy and France were halted and Lisbon, Portugal was added.

The S.S. Washington arrived in Lisbon in late August 1939 to pick up American evacuees. Paul Phillips was tasked with validating credentials, visas, and passports of the refugees prior to their boarding the ship. He was surprised and delighted to welcome, a Saratoga Springs native, Claire Desidoro, who was in line for boarding. Claire, graduated from Saratoga Springs High School and Skidmore College. Saratoga Springs was a "small town" at that time and the Phillips and Desidoro families were very close. Claire was employed as an instructor in Romance Languages at Skidmore College and she sailed to Europe in the spring of 1939 in order to take classes at Perugia University of Linguistics in Italy. With the ports in Italy and France abandoned the American Embassy assisted Claire and other Americans in Italy, by obtaining transport to France and then to Lisbon.

On September 1, 1939 Germany invaded Poland. On the 3<sup>rd</sup>, Britain, France, Canada declared war on Germany, and the same day a U-Boat sank the British liner Athena causing the deaths of 30 Americans on board. Four days later the Washington was one night out of Lisbon when it was hailed by a U-Boat which directed them to pick up the survivors of the British freighter, Olive Grove, which the U-Boat had sunk. The ship stopped in Southampton, then steamed on to Galway Bay, and home to New York. The Washington was designed for 1,050 passengers and 700 crew, but this trip the ship carried 1,790 passengers 700 of whom were children! Paul's mother and sister and Claire's mother were waiting on the pier when the ship docked in New York.

The Washington was to immediately return to Europe for more evacuees. However the National Maritime Union refused to let them return without a formal agreement for a 10% bonus for voyages to the war zone. The Union's demands were still unresolved when the Washington left New York for Europe in late spring of 1940.

The Washington arrived in Lisbon in June, took on board 1,020 refugees and put back to sea. At 5 A.M. the next morning, on June 11, 1940, 180 miles from Lisbon a U-Boat surfaced near the Washington and demanded the vessel be abandoned in 10 minutes. The passengers and 570 crew members hustled into the lifeboats and abandoned the ship, amazingly, with no panic. Eventually, the U-Boat captain realized this vessel was American and left the scene. The passengers and crew remained in the lifeboats for another hour before returning to the ship. The

Washington steamed on to anchor in Galway Bay where over 500 additional evacuees were anxious to leave Europe.

Paul Phillips, now the purser's chief clerk, was deputized to go ashore in the ship's motor launch, validate the refugees' credentials and have them moved aboard the ship. When that task was complete, Paul and the crew of the launch headed back to the ship in a windblown, very choppy sea. A rogue wave hit the launch and washed Paul into Galway Bay. Immediately, 2 crewmen jumped into the sea to rescue Paul. With Paul's help, all 3 scrambled back into the launch. Tragically, very quickly after regaining the launch, Paul was stricken and died in the launch. The Irish authorities and the Gardai held an inquest, on board the Washington into Paul's death. The inquest ruled the death accidental, the result of shock and cardiac arrest. Paul was 27 years old.

Shortly after the end of the war, Paul J. Phillips, merchant seaman, was recognized by the United States as among the earliest Americans to lose their life in the conflict. Indeed, among the many monuments to those who died as a result of WWII is one erected in 1947 by the parish of the Church of Saint Peter on Broadway in Saratoga Springs. Paul Phillips' sacrifice is memorialized, there, along with 17 other members of the parish.

Paul was my mother's (Mary Phillips Murray) brother, my uncle. Claire Desidoro was my wife Susanne's mother's (Angela Desidoro Tarantino) sister, Sue's aunt. Paul and Claire's stories of their experiences are an important part of our family's history.