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Pls retain in Asbestos file.

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Medical time bomb ticked away for 30 years before exploding Asbestos cancer victim won't give up

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United Press International

NORTH SMITHFIELD, R.I. — Hints of cancer show in Joe Ruggieri's face and body, but not in his eyes.

In his eyes there is calm and hope that say he plans to live, but his face is colorless, drained. Slowly, the cancer is taking its toll. It is incurable. It is also rare, but becoming more common.

Doctors say it has killed everyone it has ever touched. They say he has only a few months to live. Still, Joe believes, that just maybe, he will be one of the first to beat it.

His hope springs from resilience. He is dying, but he won't just lay down and let it happen.

"With all the research they're doing," he says, "maybe they'll come up with something. I have to count on that."

His cancer is called mesothelioma, cancer of the lung lining. It is caused by asbestos.

Joe Ruggieri has known it was in him for a year. The seeds of it have been in him for 30 years. They were planted in 1949, in the Brooklyn Naval Yard, in the belly of an aging tanker.

Every day, for four months, a 19-year-old Navy seaman named Ruggieri helped overhaul the Sabine, scraping, painting, cleaning. Above and around him, others tore cover from pipes and sandblasted the hull.

Asbestos dust filled the ship. Day and night, Joe inhaled it. Millions of fibers pierced the soft, moist air sacks in his lungs, and over the decades, turned them to useless loather.

Now he is dying. He is not alone.

Eleven million Americans have been exposed to dangerous doses of asbestos since 1940. That is the estimate of the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare. The exposure was heavy for half — putting them at high risk for mesothelioma.

It is an insidious disease. The fibers tick inside for 20, 30, 35 years. Then, suddenly, cancer.

The ticking, now, is beginning to peak. The peak will last a long time. HEW estimates 67,000 Americans will die from asbestos disease every year for 30 years, the legacy of decades of negligence in the workplace.

The biggest body count will be veterans. HEW says that 1.5 million were exposed when building ships to fight World War II. Half may die from it. Asbestos may kill eight times more at home than the enemy killed overseas.

Dr. Irving J. Selikoff of New York's Mount Sinai Hospital is the country's leading authority on asbestos disease. He puts the death statistics in more direct terms. It is, he says, "a disaster."

Joe Ruggieri is part of that disaster, but not an idle victim. After a life as a quiet, middle-class businessman, Joe became a fighter. He decided to force the Navy to admit it gave him cancer, and to pay for it.

Thousands of other victims, mostly from industry, have sued asbestos companies, asking more than \$2 billion. Dozens have won. Nearly 200 Electric Boat workers, a third from Rhode Island, are headed for a Hartford, Conn., court April 24 on just such a case. Two years ago, only nine EB workers were suing. But the number grew, and a recent health study indicates still more may join the list.

In 1977, Dr. Selikoff completed a survey of 1,000 Rhode Island and Connecticut Electric Boat employees. Half, he found, showed some evidence of lung disease; either asbestosis, a strangling respiratory illness, or cancer. More than 100,000 have worked at Electric Boat's shipyards.

Joe's fight was lonelier than the legal battles of industrial victims because Joe is a veteran. He challenged the Navy, not an asbestos company. Many have won private claims, but only a handful of veterans have gotten the Navy to pay.

The government has a rule for disability compensation. It demands the illness occur in the service or, at the latest, a year later.

Joe Ruggieri's cancer did not come for 29 years, three decades from the time of his exposure. Joe had to prove the Navy was responsible anyway. He eventually succeeded, although the compensation is limited and small in comparison to what might be awarded in a civil suit. He is seeking now to find the company that supplied the asbestos in the first place.

In August 1977, when the cancer's symptoms first appeared, he was 47. It started subtly, first with a shortness of breath on the tennis court, then with a slow loss of weight.

"At first I didn't notice," Joe says. "I was too involved in my work and my family to worry about little things."

Joe talked in the kitchen of his big house in a rolling, shaded, North Smithfield neighborhood. The Dream.

His wife, Connie, sits beside him. David, 13, and Charles, 17, watch TV. Denise, 21, is at college. Lassie, a Collie, drapes herself on the floor. Taped to the refrigerator is an old, crayon-drawn placard: "To the world's greatest parents."

A year before, Joe Ruggieri had been an executive with Peterbilt Trucks of Foxboro, Mass., making \$43,000 a year. He carried 150 pounds on a trim 5-foot-7 frame. He jogged, he played tennis. His life was rich.

Connie remembers waking in December 1977 and staring at her husband as he slept. His complexion wasn't right. "Finally, one Friday I just decided to call his doctor. I said Joe has been losing weight, he's got no appetite."

Tests found fluid in his chest cavity. The doctors urged him to check into a hospital. Woonsocket Hospital was full. The blizzard came. Days of waiting turned to weeks. The pain continued. The fluid built. Working became a strain.

On March 3, 1978, Joe Ruggieri was admitted to Woonsocket. It was a Friday. On Monday, the doctor put a needle in his side and inserted a tube into his lung cavity.

More than a half gallon of fluid drained out. The doctors studied the fluid and found malignant cells, but it was baffling because there was no sign where the cells had come from. They knew Joe had cancer, but at first, the cancer had no name.

Mesothelioma is not a viewable tumor. It clings like tree bark to the lung. Often, only specialists can detect it. The tests went on.

"I tried not to be depressed," Joe recalls. "I was just keeping my fingers crossed."

His voice is calm. Somehow, he has overcome the horror of it. Not Connie. The hurt and fear that should be in Joe's eyes show instead in hers.

On March 20, 1978, the tubes came out. Joe was wheeled into the operating room so a sample could be taken from his lung. The biopsy turned into a major operation. They cut Joe open from his left shoulder blade to his middle chest. They scraped

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the lining from his lung, doing the best they could to stop the spread of the unstoppable.

Through his fog of pain, Joe accepted the reality. He had cancer. He also had hope.

"I thought it was a cancer that could be cured," he says. "I figured it wasn't in the bones, it wasn't spreading. The X-rays didn't show any tumor. I figured they'd go in and cut it out and it'd be out of my system."

Soon he learned it was far more serious. The word mesothelioma meant nothing to him. He asked for more information. It was then, for the first time, that he heard the other word.

"They said mesothelioma was almost always caused by asbestos," Joe recalls. "So they asked, 'Have you ever worked with asbestos?' I said, 'No.' I said my whole life, I never worked with it. I've been a businessman."

He smiles.

"Then it dawned on me. The Navy yard."

Just out of high school in 1949, Joseph Angelo Ruggieri joined the Navy as a path to a career in business. His first duty: deckhand on the USS Sabine, a creaky old tanker in need of a complete overhaul.

Almost every inch of the ship was doubly insulated with asbestos. Joe was never given a breathing mask or any other protective gear.

For weeks he worked scraping the hull below the waterline. Every time he scraped, sprays of asbestos churned up. Above him, men on platforms sandblasted the ship. Clouds of dust came down over him.

He lived and breathed dusty air laden with asbestos fibers so tiny it takes 250,000 of them, end to end, to make an inch.

"Of course it got to me," he says. "For three months, there was complete dust. When we ate, there was dust all over the place. Even when we slept."



UPI Telephoto

Joe Ruggieri, 49, strolls with his wife, Connie. He is a victim of mesothelioma, a cancer of the lung lining caused by asbestos.

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