

Letter from the 'ol gal

By: Rich Palmer BM2

It's true you know!

The answer to the question that you all have asked.

Yes we can!

The question you've asked while looking at a loved one lying still and cold in a deep sleep.

Yes we can feel.

Yes we can hear.

And yes we can see.

See not in a normal way. My eyes were removed at the end of the last watch. Even the binoculars that looked out over the miles of oceans were stowed for the last time.

I knew today was going to be different. There was much sadness all around. Your heads were hanging low, you spoke in whispers as shipmates said goodbye. Handshakes were tighter, held just a moment longer. The little piece of striped cloth I always wore so proudly was being folded and put away. Put away for the last time. Then as the last of you departed, you stood tall, in a straight line, with a crisp hand salute you said good bye.

I was so proud of all of you. So proud to see you in the white uniforms you wore. So proud of the work we did together. Good bye my friends.

We did some amazing things together didn't we? The places we saw. How many miles did we travel together. The parties we had as we went north and south. You know I was there all that time watching over you. So many of you were just youngsters, the first time away from momma and poppa, scared to death, I heard your cries late at night. I felt the ache as you looked at pictures of home, wondering if that gal would wait like she promised. But I took care of you like they did, I fed you and I kept you warm and dry. You older ones were the ones I worried about the most. Some of you were like old oak trees, hard, stiff. But you came about, you always did.

Then, oh my gosh, I remember the ones that were all spit and polish, fresh from school. You thought by standing straight and talking louder things would get done, you guys came about too! How funny you looked after some of the first jobs we did together. I could have told you those black oil stains just can't be removed.

After the last of you left, it got so lonely. The days were long, the nights longer yet. I felt my pulse slowing, I grew colder.

Someone pulled the plug, the lights went out, but wait I'm still here. I knew I was still here. People, as they walked by, would say my name. They said the number that had been assigned to me. I'm still here.

Months passed until it was decided where 'THEY' wanted to keep me. Those people had no idea of who I was, what I accomplished in my life. They didn't treat me very kindly. They kept tugging at me. Pushing and tugging hey where's the dignity for a lady like me? I finally ended up in a place that smelled like an old closet with a stinky chemical placed in the corners to keep the moths away.

As days past and I got used to my new lot in life, I became aware of some of my old friends . I wanted to call out to some of them and ask where I was, and how long they had been here, but I just couldn't get up enough steam, all I could do was lay here. In the berths next to me were some of the old gals I ran with. Boy the stories we could tell, we had the same duty, "back in them good old days".

Across the aisle I could see friends that I helped out by filling their bellies when they were empty. We got to be close friends, sometimes we got a little to close if you know what I mean. We took our bumps and scratches in stride, we had a job to do.

Down that other row were all my big brothers that protected me while I was working. Hi fellas I tried to shout, wanna stop by for a drink. They looked back eyes vacant. How sad, their barrels were hanging lower then I remember, maybe if I could wag my rudder at them like I used to. Those boys could really shout, heard 'em for miles. Then they'd blow smoke up your ass if they didn't like you.

Years went by, I got used to the slow roll, hot summer sun and the cold tide washing past me. I saw some of you from time to time as you rode by. You'd point at me and say, "there she is son, boy we had a good time together". I laughed at the stories you told your friends. No the waves never got 'that' big, and the storms were never 'that' stormy, they all listened intently and admired us for our service.

Many more of you watched me from above. Way up in the sky I saw you looking down between the clouds, checking up on me I suppose. Many miles above, but I could almost feel your presence, hear you thoughts, and see your smile.

One by one my friends would be tugged away. And after they left I would never see them again. Where did they go? Would they come take me some day too?

My answer came early one morning when those bullies started pushing and tugging at me like they did before. I tried to tell them to take it easy on the old sides, we're getting thinner. This new place is kinda cool. I got a bath on the outside and let's just call it a bath on the inside too, if you know what I mean? My joints feel a little rusty nothing a little exercise wouldn't cure. I was beginning to feel alive again, people walking around, calling out my name. Hey this is OK!

Then this big brute came up alongside, he was kinda cute, we hooked up right away, ladies know how that is, 'it was love at first sight'. He put some nice chain jewelry around my neck and said he wanted to take me places. The eyes that always looked out for me hadn't been replaced, but I felt comfortable just following along. I never really got warmed up by this guy, but loved the feel of the open sea, the salt spray, the tossing and rolling. I was happy again!

As we went further south the days got warmer. I saw the King waving at me and heard the shellbacks singing as we passed by, they were drunk as ever. I was half expecting a party but no one came.

I'm beginning to think this cruise isn't going to have a happy ending. I just kept getting tugged along day after day.

When we finally slowed I could tell we were near a port-of-call I'd never seen before. I'd been many places, but not this one. Couple little guys came alongside, offered to help this old lady, (which I took offense to) the rest of the way in. It was hard to understand their language but I liked the music, the bright colors and the funny straw hats they wore. 'ole let's go!

OH my gosh, can it be true, familiar faces on the beach waving, smiling, taking pictures. I knew I should have asked for a makeover before we left home. Play that funky music white boy, we gonna have a good time tonight!

It didn't take long to get settled in and secured at my new home. I was beginning to feel the love from my visitors. I recognize those footsteps, I know the faces, oh if I could only remember the names, there were so many of you over the years. There was something wrong, it didn't feel like a party, there was sadness in their hearts. I was being told about what would happen, kinda like when your doctor visits before an operation. As the shock wore off, I was told about an association that had been formed in my name and museum that would hold a few of my belongings back in the town where it all started. I'm in their hands now. I heard they were going to throw one heck of a party.

I want to thank those sailors and their ladies that came to see me make my last 'Port-o-Call'. Wish it could have been under better circumstances. As you look at the pieces of my deck in your homes, think kindly of me and don't forget to tell the grand kids what a grand old lady I was. We did one hellofa good job didn't we?

FROM: USS PONCHATOULA AO 148

To all those that walked my decks, HAND SALUTE