**I Love the Navy**

**By EWCM(SW/AW) Robert S. Lanham, USN**

USS John Hancock (DD-981) (prior cruise) It's three days before Christmas. We are on deployment, transiting from the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea. We will be underway on Christmas day, probably somewhere in the Red Sea. That's a long way from home.

But through all this, one fact still rings true:

I Love the Navy.

I love the salt spray in my face as the ship speeds through the water. (YES!) The beauty of a sunrise or sunset at sea, with the myriad of colors painted brilliantly against the horizon that seems to stretch forever, is without equal anywhere else on earth. Then, as darkness envelopes the ship like a favorite old blanket, the stars appear to guide us on our way, the constellations outlined against a blackness that no landlubber can understand or appreciate.

I Love the Navy.

I love the camaraderie that grows among Sailors on a ship at sea, especially during deployment. The quiet, friendly banter of a mid watch, discussing happenings in ports already visited and expectations for those still to come. Good-natured needling of one's Shipmates about a girl or guy back home, their latest misadventure on the beach or their total lack of fashion sense in choosing liberty attire. The sincere congratulations given to one selected for advancement, designated Enlisted Surface Warfare Specialist (ESWS), or rejoicing over news of the birth of a child, the new father proud and tearful, happy and sad, all at the same time.

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I love the daily routine, all the bells and boatswain's pipes, the inconsistencies and seemingly endless tests of one's patience. The sight of Sailors on the mess decks, wolfing down chow as they give voice to complaints too numerous to mention, then go out and give their all that day in every evolution. I admire the ability of Sailors, despite the hectic schedule of a day at sea, to steal quiet moments alone to read a few lines of a book, pen a quick letter to a loved one, or share small talk on the fantail as they watch the sea go by. I love the evening prayer before "taps" at sea, reminding us of the God who made these very seas we sail. I love the singing of "Navy Blue and Gold" to close a day at the Naval Academy, the words and emotion with which the song is sung sending chills over my body and bringing tears of pride to my eyes.

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I love the support of our friends and family back home. They are the ones who give us the strength to persevere. The care packages, sent to one but shared by many. The drawings from my small daughters, which always seem to include a representation of the ship clearly marked with "981" to separate it from the ships of other daddies, and a picture of me, usually wearing a shirt that has "U.S.N." printed on the front. Videos of spouses and children, often saying no more than, "Hi! We love you and miss you!" that still bring tears to the eyes of those watching. Letters from parents and grandparents that say how proud they are to tell their friends that, "Yeah, Johnny's over there in the Gulf keepin' Saddam in line!"

I Love the Navy.

I love the thrill of seeing a Sailor develop confidence, poise and pride in themselves and their Navy. Whether a newly reported Sailor in boot camp or on board ship, or a plebe at the Naval Academy, the energy and enthusiasm of our young people is contagious, reinforcing one's belief in the values on which America was founded. Their love of country and willingness to sacrifice fills my heart with hope for the future of our country and our Navy. Their potential is boundless, limited only by our belief in them and our willingness to teach, to trust, to push them to levels of performance even they would not have thought possible. Their mission is somber; to lead our Navy and our country into the next century, into a world of uncertainty, a world of change, a world of conflict. These young people are our most precious asset. They are up to the challenge. We must lead them well today so they can protect our way of life tomorrow.

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I love the pride and release of emotion seen as a ship returns from deployment, thousands of friends and loved ones crowding the pier, anxious for that first glimpse of one gone so long, missed so much. The men and women of the warship standing tall in sharp dress uniforms, wanting to scan the faces on the pier in search of their family, but held by pride to a position of loose parade rest, allowing only their tear-filled eyes to betray their military bearing. I love the sheer joy of reuniting with loved ones, an emotional mixture of hugs and kisses, blended with tears, the overwhelming feeling of having shared the burden of sacrifice beyond expression.

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I love the rising and falling tides of emotions experienced at a commissioning ceremony of the Naval Academy. The reflection and reminiscing evident in the eyes and on the fresh young faces of 900+ soon-to-be Ensigns and 2nd Lieutenants, as they scan the Navy-Marine Corps Stadium crowd for friends and family. The excitement building as names are called, company-by-company, midshipman-by-midshipman. The pride and joy as each one receives their degree, thrusting it skyward as they exit the stage. Wanting to laugh, shout and cry, but able to do nothing because of the huge lump in their throats created by the sudden realization that, 'Four years together by the bay,' are about to end, and a journey they have anxiously awaited for so long about to begin.

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I love the chill I get every time I hear the National Anthem, whether at a ceremony, a sporting event or during morning and evening colors. The pride I feel as the Ensign is closed up, causing me to stand a little taller, shoulders back, chest out, head held high, rendering my best hand salute. I love our flag, Old Glory, the red, white and blue, the colors that never run. After 223 years, she is still a beacon for those who hope, for those who seek freedom, who seek opportunity and the pursuit of happiness. I love the fact that our Navy carries her colors and her message to the rest of the world, in the air, on land and at sea.

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I love crawling out of my rack, greeting shipmates as we go about the task of preparing for another day at sea. Taking a fresh mug of coffee out on the weather decks, watching the sunrise and the sea as she passes slowly by, unchanged through centuries untold. I loved watching the crew come together yesterday for the Christmas holiday, giving homemade cards and sharing gifts. The Chiefs serving chow and waiting tables on the mess decks for the Christmas meal. The wardroom's production of "How the Grinch Stole Christmas" over the 1MC. Listening as the ship's choir sang one beautiful Christmas carol after another, allowing us to close our eyes and imagine we really were home after all. Watching "It's a Wonderful Life" on the flight deck with shipmates as Christmas day became Christmas night. Enjoying the 'Gingerbread Village' so painstakingly prepared over the previous week by the Chief Cook and several volunteers. Seeing the most glorious sunset imaginable as the darkening sea tucked the fading orange sun back into her pocket for another night.

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For nearly seventeen years I have enjoyed getting up and going to work each morning, at school, at sea, on recruiting duty and at the Naval Academy. This is a blessing precious few can claim. I have enjoyed the thousands of special friends made throughout the course of a career winding down. Many I will never see or speak to again, but we are all bound together by the intertwined threads of the call to service, the call of the sea and an undying love of our Navy and our country. We are all "Shipmates."

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I love the emotion of a retirement ceremony. I always get choked up as the awards are given, especially those presented to a spouse who has sacrificed in relative anonymity for the career of their Sailor. The reading of "The Watch" always sends a trickle of tears down my cheeks. And finally, the retirement speech and its' accompanying emotion as a shipmate faces the reality of being "piped ashore" for the final time make me wonder how one can get through such an ordeal without breaking down. I think of my own ceremony and wonder what range of emotions I'll endure. Many times I imagine the awards presented to my lovely wife and daughters, who have, by their sacrifices, made this Sailor's career possible. I think of how I might give thanks to my parents, who instilled in me the values that guided me through my early years in the Navy. I imagine the struggle of mentioning shipmates past and present, without whom I would never have succeeded. And I feel myself choking back a torrent of tears as I try to find words that can adequately express my love and respect for my wife and daughters, three wonderful gifts from God, who makes all things possible. But even if that inevitable day brings no intelligible words, it will be all right. After all, my tears will say what is really in my heart......

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