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Cruising Through Life

Patrick Potter

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Cruising Through Life Patrick Potter

Out the left side windows of the tour bus I saw the gleaming blue of the bay, the greyish white sand and translucent lapping waves, palm trees, and in the distance, our white-and-blue cruise ship, stolid and distinct. We'd been on the Caribbean cruise for six days; this was our third excursion ashore.

Turning back to our window, looking past my wife, cinder block and tin shanties rolled past. Most were homes, but some sections included rough bars, restaurants or shops. The cinder block walls came in a profusion of colors, pinks and reds to blues and blacks. The profusion apparently came from whatever color was at hand. The tin roofs were rust-red or dirt-brown. None of the structures looked appealing – maybe adequate for a tropical climate, but not a place for civilized folks to live.

We passed several blocks at low speed, snarled in traffic. I glimpsed one home with begrimed dirt floors where four guys sprawled around on ragged chairs, legs akimbo. A couple of them were in their twenties, the other two much older, close to the end of any promising times in life. On the next block, an attractive young woman scampered into a doorway, tugging two squirming young boys behind her and away from the clogged road. Another half-block down, through an open window, a sleeping person sprawled over a narrow cot. I briefly reflected on the young woman's future prospects. The others rolled through my imagination as well. There seemed little reason for optimism.

My neighbor across the aisle, taken by the sight of the sea and beach, remarked, "Sure are beautiful sights through here."

I shot back, "Not such a great place for the permanent residents," before being mindful of my quick rancor. He gave me a sour glance. I didn't blame him. I'd been the happy, easy-to-get-

Cruising Through Life Patrick Potter

along-with fellow traveler, soaking up the sun, sights, and plentiful food and drink. I wasn't sure why I'd cut loose that way. My wife wasn't either. She gave me her "What was that?" look.

I shifted in my seat. "No, I mean it's really ... scenic and all. It's just some of the housing seems like low quality."

"Yeah, true," my neighbor conceded after a pause. We didn't talk much more as the bus arrived at the dock. We exited the bus and headed down the dock, past the shiny, chrome-plated tax-free shops. We lost my bus partner in the growing crowd, happily for both of us. My wife and I passed dock security, then past the ship security checkpoint, and proceeded back up the ramp onto the ship. It took my breath away, every time we stood up against the ship. Huge and pristine, everything seemed to operate in proper order. The ship's welcoming party and security personnel were arrayed as normal, looking sharp and fresh.

Most of the crew members were small and dark-skinned, similar to the Central Americans we'd just seen. The crew members were universally trim, fit, and stylish. Most were from Indonesia, the Philippines or Singapore. They wore a range of uniforms, from the white dress uniforms with gold trim for the officers, to the black trousers and white shirts of the security staff, and the jaunty grey outfits with crimson trim of the hospitality crew. Even the deck crew was sharp-looking in grey coveralls trimmed in black.

Two days earlier, on a sea day, I'd gone to a gathering of veterans. These events occurred on many cruises; I'd found them interesting in the past. Usually you already knew who the vets were from their colorful headgear. My wife had pointed out the event on the daily schedule and told me it was at the Gallery Bar, just past the Casino. It proved very informal. Several vets had picked up drinks as they mingled. It seemed like a good idea, even at 2 p.m., so I ordered a bourbon and coke, something with a little kick and some caffeine.

Cruising Through Life Patrick Potter

Everyone introduced themselves at the start. Half the vets were long-winded, while a few left me wanting to know more. Most were Army but several were Air Force - barely qualified as military from my perspective. There were two Marines, both verbose, and three Navy guys, all talking technical stuff, even in a short summary of their service. I remember there were three because one had been on subs, one on aircraft carriers, while another had done crypto work. At least two vets were foreign – from Canada and Australia. The guy I sat next to had retired from the Army like me, and proved to be a real talker. I chatted with him for over an hour with him doing most of the talking. I didn't mind; I'm not a real big storyteller myself.

At the start, he got onto the topic of the VA medical services in his hometown in Florida, “The VA counselors are a great batch of guys—saved my ass more than once.” He provided more detail than I needed, even describing forms and things like that. But our conversation grew more interesting as he mentioned problems he had with migraines, and times when he suffered flashbacks from his tours in Vietnam. He'd been an Army medic, with two full 13-month combat tours, who then finished up his Army career in the 1970s.

His name was Ollie Brownhill. As we worked on our second drink, we loosened up and our conversation drifted toward more interesting stuff.

I asked, “How was your time as a combat medic in ‘Nam?” I'd recently read a combat novel that highlighted the role that medics played at the company and platoon level. I felt some unease in asking the question – was I opening up a bag of worms that might prove awkward or even painful for him?

He carefully replied, “Those were tough times. I came close to leaving the Army after getting out of the boonies.” His voice slowed to one of reverie and reflection.

Cruising Through Life Patrick Potter

“I bet. Hell, I’m sure most guys coming out of fighting in the jungle couldn’t wait to get back to civilization and out of the Army.”

“That’s right,” he said “But most of those really suffered from their demons. Nobody understood what they’d been through, not even their families.”

“You were probably close to your guys as a medic. Were you normally assigned down to squad level?” I thought back to my peace-time tours in armor units, where many tank crews and tank platoons were close-knit, mostly hanging together, willing to defend and proclaim their bonds, even over other crews in their unit.

“No, we were assigned at platoon level, but usually for months at a time . We got to know everyone in the platoon real well. We were like brothers, and we had to try to help the guys at their worst times. Real sad. Funny, too, because I definitely didn’t like a lot of them, but when they were hurting, they needed me. I had to be there for them.”

After sips from our highballs, he continued, “Like I said, I’m glad I stayed in. I might not have had a future at all. My buddies who left the service, they just lost themselves. Some became alcoholics or addicts. And two that I know of likely killed themselves. The Army and then the VA gave me a fighting chance to stay, well, ... kind of sane and normal.”

It turned out that he’d made it through twenty-two years of service and then became a civilian medical assistant, build a nice home, and raised a solid family. He was happy to give the Army credit for his success. Now, he and his wife were celebrating their 50th anniversary with the cruise.

“I know what you mean,” I said. “The military was hell for lots of guys. Mostly those who didn’t make it back, or returned all messed up. But it’s been good for lots of others.” I told him my story, and that of my dad and several of his buddies, and even about my son who was

Cruising Through Life Patrick Potter

mid-way through an Army career. My dad and another of his friends had been raised in relative poverty in Appalachian hollers. They could have led a tough life with few opportunities or amenities, but the military offered a way to get out, explore the world, and make a life. They took a chance on a future that they didn't really understand, and it worked out for them.

The day after the shore excursion in Mexico, I attended the 4 p.m. daily Catholic mass, in the Hudson Room of the Promenade Deck. A deacon led the mass. During a period of quiet reflection, I directed some of my prayers to my new buddy, Ollie, hoping ghosts from his past would not reappear. I also prayed for a recently departed army friend from back home in Virginia, along with recently deceased and ill family members. Then I thought to add the people I'd seen in the small coastal villages during our bus excursion. "Please Lord, let them all find opportunity, or some level of happiness in their circumstances."

We spent a good amount of time in the ship's resplendent restaurant, enjoying the excellent cuisine and attentive service. Most days I tried to walk at least a couple of miles around the outside Promenade Deck to work off some of the fine meals. One circuit around the ship was a third of a mile. Especially on the bright and breezy days, there were always sights to see from the Promenade deck: distant ships and boats, sea life including porpoises and jumping fish, islands or shorelines. I once saw a huge sea turtle just a foot or two under the translucent water. The Promenade Deck lay four decks above the vast expanse of blue ocean.

Looking out from the mahogany railing at the stern allowed me to witness the power of the ship in the thrashing, turmoiled white foam below, as unseen propellers pushed the 84,000-ton vessel through the ocean at 24 knots. The long silver-white foam trail of our passage could be seen out to the horizon, standing out against the bright cerulean blue of the water. The noise of

Cruising Through Life Patrick Potter

the tumultuous water below made it hard to hear. I stopped my walk and leaned on the port side rail, watching the cascading water,

I glimpsed movement at the starboard side of the promenade. That was unexpected as most walkers went clockwise around the ship, coming from behind where I stood. I glanced over to see that a guy had moved from behind the ship's structure and toward the railing. He seemed familiar—yes, it was Ollie. He walked purposefully to the rail, not looking in my direction. I had a brief and terrible premonition that something awful might happen. I almost shouted out at him. At that moment, a woman moved toward him. They linked arms and stood gazing over the trashing foam out to the peaceful horizon.