

# Earning the Anchors by Bridging the Gap

By MC2(SW/AW) Timothy Walter

The wrinkles near his eyes draw tight as his teeth begin to show. A grin forms in delight. And 92 years of life read clearly on the lines of his face. He has seen much and more than he expected. Today he saw something different.

A few hours earlier, Loren Hoercher wasn't smiling. He didn't seem sad either. But the excitement just wasn't there. He sat in his recliner watching the television with the curtains shut tight. His daughter, Beverly, spoke in a shout to convey a message. He still didn't like his new hearing aid. A Bible sat beneath a pile of books on a tray next to him and his walker stood nearby.

He seemed content but then he glowed. A stream of blue camouflage poured out of a gray van into his home in Newport News, Va. It was formed by Sailors. But not simply any Sailors – they were the selects. Chosen from among their peers, these men and women were Chief Petty Officers in training. Halfway into the six-week induction process, each looked tired but determined. Eight of them arrived with a purpose – to make a difference and serve a man who served his country.

Hoercher, who goes by his nickname “Woody,” was not in the Navy. He is a retired Army Master Sergeant. Twenty years in green made their mark, and he was more than happy to show it as he handed his awards to the Sailors, more than

a half century his junior. His pride however, wasn't on a plaque. It was in his stare and evident by the words on his back.

He wore the t-shirt of his brethren – the survivors and fallen of the Anzio beachhead. In World War II, Allied forces launched an amphibious assault on the German troops near Anzio, Italy. What ensued was one of most protracted death matches of the war with more than 40,000 killed, wounded or missing between the dueling armies. Due to a variety of factors, including insufficient troops and poor execution of the battle plan, Allied forces spent a little more than four months trapped in reclaimed marshland, trying to survive a constant rain of artillery and bullets.

Woody survived and he endures. He does not often tell stories about this chapter of his life to outsiders but sometimes he can't help it.

“He said he doesn't like to think about standing on that beach and watching his best friends die two feet away,” said Chief (Select) Fire Controlmen (SW/AW) Gene Kidd. “But he couldn't help talk about parts of it with us. You can't hold back memories like that.”

Instead Woody likes to say he held “too many jobs to remember” during his time in the service. And he counsels those younger than himself to stay in the military, because in his words,

“It's worth it.”

He talks but his eyes talk more.

Woody didn't just sit at a desk in a uniform. He went through hell and these George H.W. Bush Sailors showed up at his doorstep to say thanks.

“We respect and cherish those men and women who have gone before us to defend freedom. Woody is one of them,” said Command Master Chief David Colton, a long-time friend of the Anzio veteran. “He is a man that deserves to be remembered.”

To honor him, the Chief Selects planned to cut the grass that was two-weeks too long, trim the hedges that were forgotten, and fill the bare spot next to his front steps with a reminder that new flowers grow in old soil.

Unfortunately, as they arrived so did the rain. For 20 minutes, showers came in sideways. But Chief Selects don't have time for excuses. They are bred to produce results. And in the midst of a downpour, they prepared their equipment.

“We were going to do it regardless of the weather,” said Chief (Select) Logistics Specialist (SW/AW) Nicki Garcia. “We went out there to do a job, and we were going to get it done – rain, snow, sleet or shine.”

Two hours later, a few grass clumps damp from the rain marked the path of the mower. Hedges looked tamed. And flowers – bought by the Sailors – bloomed where bare earth lay before.

Woody watched the work from his porch, one hand on his walker, the other on the railing. When he saw the flowers, his eyes lit up.

As he looked across his yard, Beverly joined him at the doorstep with Senior Chief Culinary Specialist (SW/AW) Derrick Cooper, who led the group. The American flag was at his side and to his front stood eight Chief Selects with a brow skirt of USS George H.W. Bush. They shouted and they sang – first the Sailor’s Creed, then Anchors Aweigh.

“We had a sense of pride and brotherhood. It was an indescribable feeling of being able to help someone,” Garcia said. “To actually meet a survivor – that’s pretty much the best thing that’s ever happened to me. I never thought I would do that.”

Following the song, Beverly smiled and Woody raised his hand to the group, a gesture from one branch to another spanning generations. “I hope my kids will one day talk about me in the same way that his daughter spoke about him,” Garcia said.

The day ended with Sailors in the kitchen, pizza in hand and smiles all around. Woody didn’t need to say a word. His face said it all.



