

By Marc Liebman, Captain, USN (Retired)

The U.S.S. America (CV-66) was plunging through the Atlantic headed south on the first leg of what would be an around the world cruise. After leaving Norfolk and pausing briefly for an operational readiness exercise off Puerto Rico, the first stop for the ship and its escorts was Rio.

From there, the small task group would go around the Cape of Good Hope and thirty days later, arrive in Subic Bay in the Philippines. Next stop would be our first line period on Yankee Station in the Gulf of Tonkin.

Since I wasn't scheduled to fly until later that night, I went to our ready room to hang out and watch what was known as the "PLAT," a video camera mounted in the carrier deck that tracked each airplane's approach as it tried to come aboard. Through the crosshairs on the PLAT, one could watch the struggles of one's fellow Naval Aviators with a mix of empathy and sympathy because there is no such thing as a "normal" night landing on a carrier.

I'd just settled into my high backed chair that looks just like the ones in the movies when a commander plops down next to me. I was a lowly Lieutenant Junior Grade, which is the same thing as a first lieutenant, and the commander is the equivalent of a lieutenant colonel in the Air Force, Army, or Marine Corps. Instead of a silver oak leaf there is a small cross on the left collar of his khakis.

My first thought was "Oh no, someone in my family has died or is seriously ill... Why else would a chaplain come sit next to me?"

"Lieutenant Liebman?" It was more of a statement than a question. Someone in the ready room had pointed me out.

"Yes sir." What else could I say to a senior officer?

The man had a big smile on his face so I

made the assumption that he was not the bearer of bad news. "Hi, I'm the Catholic chaplain on board the America. And, I'm here to tell you that you are the senior Jewish serviceman in the task force. As such, the task force commander authorized me to tell you that you are in charge of organizing the Seder for the 20 plus Jewish servicemen on board the America and her escorts."

I guess my stunned look and slack jaw gave my reaction away. Me? I'm just a J.G. What do I know about organizing and running a Seder on a U.S. Navy ship?

"Lieutenant, all you need to do is help me with the menu and conduct the Seder. I'll do the rest. The admiral has offered the flag mess for the Seder and his stewards will do all the cooking. The captain of America and the admiral would like to attend and will understand if you say no."

Great. Let's see, now I'll have to conduct the Seder, under the watchful eyes of a Navy Captain – same as an Army/Air Force or Marine Corps colonel – and an admiral who was – the same as a brigadier general and a Catholic chaplain. No pressure!!!

"Don't worry Lieutenant. I'm from Boston and I've attended many a Seder. Plus, several enlisted men have offered to help." It was another emotional life preserver.

He was in the ready room to ask me – he could have made it an order -to come to his office to review the chaplain's checklist for a Seder where several enlisted men who were also Jewish would be waiting. Together, we were to create the menu so the chaplain could order the food that would be flown to the America.

As I followed him down the warren of passageways and ladders what ran through my mind is the discussion that my brand new wife and I just had. Her parents came from Northern Romania and an area of the Soviet Union we know now

as Maldus and which used to be the Moldavian S.S.R. My mother's ancestors came from Spain.

She was Ashkenazi and I was Sephardic. Sephardic Jews eat rice (and popcorn) during Pesach. There's no yeast or rising involved, they expand. BTW, since we now live in Texas, we also eat corn chips and tortillas during pesach. They don't have yeast and therefore are, to my Sephardic mind, okay.

The three of us on the ad hoc pesach committee had a series of good laughs about different family traditions as we created the menu. The chaplain sat quietly in the corner taking notes and when we finished, he said, "Great. I'll get the recipes to the stewards in the flag mess and as soon as the food is on board, they'll make the dishes so we can taste them."

We had the seder right after we left Rio on April 20th, wine and all. Officers and enlisted men from the other ships were helicoptered to the America. Bunks were found for them so they could spend the night.

The maztoh balls were light and fluffy and we had a wonderful, lean brisket, kugel, a peach cobbler for dessert. As we left the flag mess, the stewards handed each of us a large container of charoses and two boxes of matzoh. I kept my charoses in our ready room refrigerator and ate it along with the matzoh for the next eight days.

As the admiral and the America's captain who years later became the Chief of Naval Operations left, came up to the two senior enlisted men and me and said, "This was outstanding and well done."

I found out later that both had been to seders before and knew what to expect. Years later, I met the captain again after he retired. He looked at me and then smiled. "One of my best friends growing up was Jewish and the seder you ran on the America was very special. It brought me back home. Thank you."

Military Suicides

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The NY Times reported in April 2015 that a study published in the April edition of the JAMA Psychiatry found no link between military suicide and deployments overseas in support of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. It was noted that as the wars continued, the suicide rates also went up and the assumption was that the deployments to the war zone must be the reason for the increase in suicide rates. However, "the suicide rate for troops deployed in support of the fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan, the study found, was only slightly higher than for troops who did not deploy to that area or remained stateside – 18.86 deaths versus 17.78 deaths per 100,000. The national av-

erage is about 13 deaths per 100,000."

In recent years, more active-duty US troops have committed suicide than have been killed in Afghanistan. In response to this problem, the military services have all taken steps to increase suicide prevention efforts including command ordered stand downs, mandated classes on suicide prevention, and the creation of educational videos. Additionally, the Department of Veterans Affairs created the Veterans Crisis Line, a 24 hour toll-free number that veterans and active-duty personnel can call when contemplating suicide.

In 2010, an estimated 22 veterans took their lives every day. One small act can make a difference in the life of a veteran or service member in crisis.

Every year, organizations across the coun-

try recognize September as Suicide Prevention Month. However, every month should be suicide prevention month. More must be done across the board to help combat the stigma against mental health and increase in veteran suicide -the data shows that getting help, helps. It could be the difference between life and death.

For veterans going through a difficult time and their loved ones who are concerned about them, a single call, chat, or text can be a critical first step. One conversation with a veteran about how he or she is doing can open the door to services and support.

Everyone can be the person who makes a difference in a veteran's life, and connecting with

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