

A Lei for a Sailor

by Bill Lapham

The sun shone on another perfect day on Oahu. It glinted off gentle waves in Pearl Harbor. Pure white clouds clung to verdant green mountain tops; cast their rainbows across the peaks. Trade winds that had carried blue sky across thousands of miles of open-ocean were scented with sea spray and orchids. The world hummed in the warm air as we waited for the boat to take us to the memorial.

Her age was a mystery to me, but she was quite old. Once the launch had arrived and its crew had invited us aboard, she reached for my hand with all the grace and dignity I had come to expect from a child of her generation. She held a lei in her other hand. She moved with the care of an ancient, a lady who had doubtless seen her friends suffer the pain of too many hips broken and loves lost.

The lady took a seat along the rail and stared straight ahead; she laid the lei across her lap. I sat next to her, but neither of us spoke. She wasn't crying, but she wasn't far from it. Her eyes were moist and bloodshot. She wore a light yellow summer dress and comfortable sandals. She had a white flower pinned in her hair. She looked -- lovely.

When we docked at the memorial, in all its regal whiteness, I helped her disembark. When she found her footing, she dropped my hand, and walked over to the rail. She looked down on the broken and sunken behemoth. ARIZONA looked lonely; a steel tomb resting in clear water under an oily sheen. Petroleum products leaked from her shattered hull, still stinking of a battle its leaders not only lost, but forfeited.

The lady tossed the lei in the water. It floated above the number two gun turret, two perfect circles, matching.

