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18 may 2002  
Charleston, SC.

7<sup>th</sup> Reunion The Rohna Survivors Memorial Association

This is about the men of the Pioneer. I've waited 59 years to say these things; please hear me out!

I joined the Navy Organized Reserves in February '41, soon after graduating from high school at 17, and had 1½ years of sea duty behind me, prior to coming to the Pioneer. This point is made ONLY to differentiate between an "Old Salt" (at 19) and the officers and enlisted men who were going to sea for the first time, as Navy men. Hopefully, that's the end of "I's."

There are only 12 of the 105 crewmen who we know to be alive. Five are here now. There are undoubtedly more, but we've not been able to find them.

The ship was commissioned 27 Feb. '43 in Beaumont, TX., and left there shortly for Norfolk, VA. She had for her Executive Officer (2nd in command) one L. E. Rogers, Jr, Lt., USNR. As the Exec. he had the primary responsibility for training of the crew. Her original complement consisted of 86% newcomers; the other 14% were the "Old Salts."

Rogers assumed command of the ship on 1 Sep '43 and served in that post until October '45 - having made Lt. Commander in August '44. In November '44 we returned to the states, and after leaves and shipboard changes proceeded westward to Okinawa, where we were on V-J Day.

The success of Captain Rogers as a Naval Officer is exemplified by the happenings of 26 Nov. '43; the ship and crew performing what a retired Rear Admiral and a retired Captain have called the greatest rescue at sea, under combat conditions, of WWII, and possibly of all time! One of these officers has proposed the Navy Cross for the Skipper

Both of these men, as well as another retired Navy Captain received their initial information as a result of their reading Don Fortune's book "The Sinking of the Rohna."

Who were the Pioneer's men? From the muster rolls (obtained from the National Archives) it's obvious that they were "everyman." That's a trite description, but believe it, it's true! They were virtually a complete cross-section of the America of those days.

By November '43, the new men aboard numbered in excess of 90% of total, and they were unified and willing to produce. "Unified" meaning that while they may have fought amongst themselves, they were as one to anyone not a "Pioneer Man." "Willing to Produce" simply breaks down to doing what was necessary to obtain a goal - time and cost notwithstanding. That they did produce is shown by the results - the smallest whip of the rescue operation accounted for in excess of 60% of the survivors. Additionally, this was their first taste of combat (only 2 of the old timers had had the experience previously.)

Tom Brokaw has called all of us the "Greatest Generation" with few, if any naysayers. In judging the men of the Pioneer I (damn it, I said I wasn't going to say that again) would suggest that, as part of that generation they stand at least 8 feet tall!

Pioneers, please stand. They don't look much different than anyone else here, do they? Excluding the ladies, of course. We know differently!

Stay standing, please fellows.

In the Navy, we do not salute while uncovered, - no hats on.

Now for that 59 year thing - Chiefs and Master Sergeants have been known for many years as, when necessary or expedient, men who are willing to bend or break a few rules.

This is mine:

Fellows!

Salute them.