



My Navy Blue Hawaii

BY ELLEN NOTBOHM

“YOU’VE WON A TRIP TO Hawaii!”

For most people, a message like this would instantly conjure up images of warm beaches, white sand, sunshine, and tropical drinks.

And then there is me.

The Hawaii I want to see lies high above Honolulu, in the crater of a volcano where a 30-foot woman carved in stone stands sentinel.

The crater, nicknamed Punchbowl for its shape, is the National Cemetery of the Pacific. Ancients called the site “Puowaina,” the “hill of sacrifice”—no name could be more fitting. Close to 77,000 service personnel from WWII, Korea, and Vietnam are memorialized there.

The 30-foot statue is Lady Columbia. She symbolizes all grieving mothers and watches over the Court of the Missing with the following dedication:

*In these gardens are recorded
the names of Americans
who gave their lives
in the service of their country
and whose earthly resting place
is known only to God.*

Traditionally, a flag-draped coffin is the evocative symbol of a fallen hero, but for the families of the

28,778 lost or buried at sea and honored in the Court of the Missing, there is no such closure. My uncle, Ensign Robert Berenson, USNR, is one of them. (“Too Soon,” *Ancestry Magazine*, September/October 2006). His name is 10 feet up one of Punchbowl’s marble walls. I call it providence when a landscape worker happens by, offering us a ladder so we can touch Uncle Bob’s name.

The view from Punchbowl encompasses Diamond Head to Pearl Harbor. But what is most striking about Punchbowl is that it is a place of extraordinary perfection, solemn and serene at the same time.

The reverence that hangs in the air at Punchbowl touches my teenage son. He is Uncle Bob’s namesake. “Mom,” he says, “*thank you* for bringing me here. I see now that I am supposed to be here.” He points out a banyan tree and how like our own family tree it is. Most of the branches reach skyward, begetting other branches that beget yet others. But one branch ends abruptly, cut short. We look to the inscription at Lady Columbia’s feet:

*The solemn pride that must be
yours, to have laid so costly a sacrifice
upon the altar of freedom.*