Heartland Hospice often has the privilege of caring for our military veterans. John, Bereavement Coordinator for Heartland Hospice Serving Northwest Pennsylvania, tells how he recently was able to provide some special comfort to one of his “Navy” men.

“I had been visiting with one of my patients at a local facility about his experiences in the US Navy and how he had enjoyed his career. He was proud to be a Navy man, and had pictures and memories posted on his walls.

“One evening, I received a call from Amanda, one of our nurses. She was with Ralph and said it would be good if I could come right away. When I arrived about 30 minutes later, Amanda and an aide were with him, applying damp cloths to his head, holding his hand and keeping him comfortable. He was unresponsive and breathing in short gasps at long intervals. Amanda was talking to him and letting him know he wasn’t alone.

“I read a passage of scripture to him, prayed with him and told him it was OK to let go. Remembering that the hearing is the last of the senses to go, an idea came to mind. There was a strong enough signal on my smart phone that enabled me to search for and find a rendition of the Navy Hymn. I read the lyrics to him and held my phone to his ear as the song played. Part way through the song, we saw a tear form in the corner of his eye and roll down his cheek. He passed away later that evening under Amanda’s care and compassion.

“This event reminds me of an aviator saying that in an emergency ‘you continue to fly the plane until it won’t fly anymore.’ In serving our dying patients, it is important to provide our highest level of care as much as possible right up to the last breath, even though they may not be able to hear and comprehend the words of comfort and encouragement we can offer. We cannot prevent a patient from dying when their time is at hand, but we can give compassion and care to them and their families to make the transition as comfortable and meaningful as possible. I hear often from families how our nurses do just that, and that their excellent work and high level of care is so much appreciated. I like to think that as Ralph embarked on that final voyage, it was the powerful and moving words of that song that gave wind to his sails.”