



Life Aboard America's Aircraft Carriers

Ten Years Service on four of the Navy's Floating Airfields

Part I

April 10, 2026

During my 24 years and 6 months in the U.S. Navy, I served aboard four aircraft carriers: **USS Intrepid (CVS-11)**, **USS Wasp (CVS-9)**, **USS Forrester (CVA-59)**, and **USS Coral Sea (CV-43)**. Over those years I progressed from an enlisted Yeoman First Class to Warrant Officer and ultimately to Lieutenant Commander. My responsibilities changed dramatically, but one thing remained constant—life aboard an aircraft carrier was unlike anything most Americans will ever experience.

An aircraft carrier is often described as a floating city, but that comparison tells only part of the story. It is also a floating airport, machine shop, warehouse, fully staffed medical clinic, hotel, office building, power plant, ammunition depot, and home for thousands of men and women deployed far from their families. With its embarked air wing aboard, more than **5,000 officers, sailors, and aviators** lived and worked together around the clock to launch, recover, maintain, and support military aircraft under some of the most demanding conditions imaginable.

For me, those ships represented far more than steel and machinery. They became my home for a combined **seven years at sea**, years that took me around the world but also away from my wife and children for long stretches of time. Looking back now, I realize that while I was building a Navy career, my family was making sacrifices every bit as real as my own.

0600: Another Day Begins

Every morning at precisely 0600, the shrill whistle of the boatswain's mate echoed through the ship's loudspeaker system.

"Reveille! Reveille! Up all hands. Turn to, heave out. The smoking lamp is lighted in all authorized spaces."

Within minutes, thousands of sleepy sailors climbed from their racks, shaved, dressed, and headed for breakfast before another long workday.

My introduction to carrier life came aboard **USS Intrepid** in 1969. As a Yeoman First Class assigned to the Captain's Office, I lived in X Division's berthing compartment. About forty sailors shared rows of stacked bunks—called "racks" in Navy terminology—along with common shower and restroom facilities. Privacy was almost nonexistent, but after a few weeks nobody gave it much thought. Carrier life quickly became normal.

As an E-6, I enjoyed one small privilege. Rather than eating with the general crew, I could carry my tray into the First Class Mess, where about thirty first class petty officers enjoyed a quieter place to eat after receiving head-of-the-line privileges in the main chow line.

The food itself was surprisingly good. Meals were well balanced, coffee flowed almost continuously, and the ever-present "bug juice"—the Navy's colorful version of Kool-Aid—accompanied nearly every meal. Every so often the cooks grilled steaks to order and served generous helpings of vegetables, pudding, Jell-O, and soft-serve ice cream. Few sailors ever complained about going hungry.

The Office Beneath the Flight Deck

The Captain's Office occupied an unfortunate location directly beneath the flight deck.

Whenever an aircraft launched, the entire compartment shook violently as the catapults hurled another airplane into the sky. It felt as though someone had rammed the ship with an automobile. Conversation stopped for a moment, coffee sloshed from mugs, and then everyone simply continued working as if nothing had happened.

This was 1969, well before personal computers, email, or office automation. Every report, letter, routing sheet, personnel record, and official document was prepared on paper. Looking back today, I marvel at how a single laptop computer could have replaced file cabinets full of records and saved countless hours of clerical work.

Ironically, our workload often eased once the ship finally got underway. The frantic rush to finish projects before sailing disappeared the moment the mooring lines were cast off. For several days there was no incoming mail until the Carrier Onboard Delivery (COD) aircraft landed with both official correspondence and those precious handwritten letters from home.

Before Email



YN1 Smothers on Flightdeck of USS Wasp (CVS-11)

Today's sailors can communicate with home almost instantly. Our generation could not.

There was no email, FaceTime, texting, or social media. Communication depended entirely upon handwritten letters that often took weeks to arrive. Mail call became one of the most anticipated events of every deployment. A letter from home could brighten an entire week.

Looking back, I regret throwing away many of the wonderful letters my wife sent while I was deployed. Today they would be priceless reminders of an era before smartphones transformed everyday life. Those letters carried far more than words. They carried reassurance that life at home was continuing, that children were growing, and that someone was waiting for you when the deployment finally ended.

Life in the Shipyard

Aircraft carriers spent much of their lives either preparing for deployment or recovering from one. Preparation usually meant months in the shipyard.

I reported aboard *Intrepid* while she was undergoing an extensive overhaul at the Philadelphia Naval Shipyard. Working conditions were anything but pleasant. Sandblasters, grinders, welders, and paint chippers worked around the clock. Since my office sat directly beneath the flight deck, replacing the thick non-skid surface overhead produced enough pounding to give a woodpecker a headache.

The smell of welding smoke drifted through nearly every compartment. Dust settled everywhere despite constant cleaning, and the ship echoed with the sound of hammers and pneumatic tools twenty-four hours a day.

Then came the day the dry dock flooded, tugs eased us into the Delaware River, and *Intrepid* returned to sea. Fresh air replaced welding fumes, the air wing came back aboard, and suddenly the ship felt alive again. There is nothing quite like feeling a ship answer the helm after months tied up in dry dock. Everyone knew that the real mission was about to begin.

A Floating Airfield

People unfamiliar with aircraft carriers often picture them simply as enormous ships. In reality, they are floating airports.

Every movement on the flight deck is carefully choreographed. Aircraft are towed from the hangar deck to elevators, lifted to the flight deck, fueled, armed, inspected, and positioned for launch. The steam catapults were noisy, hot, and immensely powerful, accelerating aircraft from zero to flying speed in just a few seconds.

Recovering aircraft was equally dramatic. Returning pilots approached the ship from astern in what amounted to a controlled crash. Guided by the Landing Signals Officer, each pilot aimed for one of several arresting cables stretched across the flight deck. The airplane's tailhook caught a cable, bringing the aircraft from well over one hundred miles per hour to a complete stop in barely two seconds.

To an outsider, the flight deck looked like complete chaos. Aircraft taxied in every direction while fuel crews, mechanics, ordnance handlers, directors, firefighters, and safety observers worked within feet of spinning propellers and screaming jet engines. Yet every sailor knew precisely where to stand and exactly what to do. The colored jerseys worn by each specialty transformed apparent confusion into one of the most efficient—and safest—industrial operations in the world.

Watching a launch cycle from the island or an upper deck was like watching a perfectly choreographed ballet performed at full throttle. Every movement had a purpose, every signal meant something, and every sailor understood that one careless mistake could have catastrophic consequences. It was dangerous work, but it was carried out with a professionalism that inspired confidence and respect.

Orders Change Everything

After leaving the shipyard and picking up the air wing, *Intrepid* headed to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, for refresher training before deployment. Refresher training was no vacation. Every department was tested and graded under simulated battle conditions to ensure the ship was ready for combat operations.

I never completed the exercise.

The Bureau of Naval Personnel needed an experienced Yeoman First Class to help commission Helicopter Anti-Submarine Squadron Seven in Rhode Island. Since *Intrepid* already had two senior yeomen assigned to the Captain's Office, I received transfer orders.

At the time, I was disappointed to leave the ship just as she was preparing to deploy. Looking back, however, those orders changed the course of my Navy career. They opened opportunities I could never have imagined and eventually led to appointments aboard three more aircraft carriers, each bringing greater responsibilities than the last.

End of Part I