



I Joined the Navy and Saw the World **Memoir by Curt S. (LCDR, USN-Ret.)**

In 1983 I had the extraordinary good fortune to sail completely around the world courtesy of the United States Navy. It wasn't a luxury cruise. My home for six months was USS Coral Sea, an aging but still formidable aircraft carrier whose mission was projecting American power—not entertaining tourists.

It wasn't the Love Boat

So, I wasn't exactly playing shuffleboard and drinking rum and coke on the Love Boat. You see, the Navy requires its crew members to pitch in and work and keep the warship humming.

This article will focus more on our places of visit between the West Coast of the United States via the Indian Ocean, Red Sea, Suez Canal, Mediterranean and ultimately the Atlantic Ocean to our new home in Virginia.

All that other stuff I had to do as ship's Administrative Officer, sort of like the Captain's City Manager, I'll skip as being esoteric, mundane, and not very interesting, except for the cruise workups when my crew of clerks and data processors took first place in damage control training and exercises. I was the Repair Party 3 leader. That was fun!

Beginning the cruise

Saying goodbye to our families is a sad and frequent ritual we Navymen endured as part of the job. (There were no women on Navy ships back then.) But one never gets used to the individual poignant scenes on the pier before the accommodation ladders are finally removed and the lines cast off separating us once again from the people we love most. We endured this sadness because we loved our ship, our Navy, and our country.

This time, however, we're going around the world!

The sad scenes behind us, our tugs pulled us away one last time from our Alameda, California, pier across the bay from San Francisco. Also sadly, we were leaving that jewel of a city for good. Our ultimate goal would be around the world to Norfolk, Virginia, which would be our new home six months later.

As we steamed beneath the Golden Gate Bridge towards that perpetual fog curtain about 12 miles offshore, I got that exhilarating feeling I always did when we finally got underway and escaped from the last minute rush and endless list of things that could only be done while tied to the pier.

North to Alaska And Then to WestPac

Our first goal was an exercise near the Alaska coast. We cruised for a few days and hit very cold weather. We were well prepared and suffered no mishaps, and all we saw was the cold sea and gray sky.

Alaska behind us, we sailed south and west. After a few days at Pearl Harbor - I love Hawaii! - we set out for what the Navy terms "WestPac." We reached Pusan, South Korea, a port in the southwest of the peninsula. Pusan is a modern city teeming with people and dry goods. The sidewalks overflowed with merchants selling everything imaginable—electronics, clothing, tools, souvenirs, and foods whose aromas drifted through the crowded streets.

On to the Philippines and Singapore!

Next stop was Subic Bay, Philippines. This was before we closed our large naval base down, so at that time it was just like visiting a stateside U.S. Navy base, only with Filipino people everywhere. Subic Bay and its abutting small town were a colorful experience. Who can forget the calls of "You buy me drink, sailor?" from the town's hundreds of bars?

We left Subic and headed for that marvelous port Singapore, which has got to be the classiest place in Asia. It is a clean, modern city and its well-dressed and impeccably behaved people are astonishingly friendly. I even enjoyed the famous Singapore Sling - a bit sweet though; but watch for that sloe gin. It sneaks up on you.

Between Singapore and our voyage through the Indian Ocean towards the Suez Canal, there was a little matter of being initiated into the ranks of Shellbacks - people who have crossed the Equator. I was not a Shellback, rather I was a despicable Poliwog.

I Was a Scurvy Pollywog!

Anyone who has ever undergone a Shellback initiation in the Navy, and especially on an aircraft carrier, knows what I went through. But it was fun - except for the part where the men in the pipe shop recognized me as an officer, pulled me out of line and made me dunk my head in a detached toilet bowl filled with Coca-Cola with Baby Ruth candy bars and toilet paper floating in it. Well, you get the picture.

The Suez Canal is a Desert Ditch

The ranks of Shellbacks increased, we steamed up through the Suez Canal. Actually, I was a bit disappointed with the canal. Picture a 100-mile long, 600-foot wide ditch filled with water flowing through a desolate, flat, brown desert on either side, and you have the Suez Canal. The ditch is broken up by two lakes to accommodate ship traffic in both directions. .

The Med at Last!

Passing into the Mediterranean was like someone had turned on the air conditioning at last. Up through the Red Sea and into the Suez Canal, a hot wind blew off the desert that made our lives miserable for weeks. Passing finally into the Mediterranean was a blessing!

Our ports of call in the Mediterranean included Naples, Italy, and Cannes, France (where we celebrated the 4th of July - back then the French were happy to see us!). Thanks to trouble with Libya's Khadafi, we had to skip our planned visit to Barcelona, Spain. (I had been to Barcelona years before during my two USS Forrestal Mediterranean cruises.)

Our final Mediterranean stop was Rota, Spain, and then westward to our new home in Norfolk, Virginia.

The precursor to every arrival home after a long voyage is what's known as the air group "fly off." Our embarked jet, prop, and helicopter aircraft leave the ship en masse for their hangars ashore at their home naval air station. It's a joyous site and means we'll be home soon.

Our New Norfolk Homeport at last

Sailing into Norfolk, Virginia, over the top of the submerged Hampton Roads Tunnel, past Fort Monroe, we are finally greeted by our fleet tug boats who guide, tow, and maneuver us to Pier 12 in Norfolk Naval Station.

Looking down at the pier from our vantage point on the flight deck (many of the crew were in "manning the rail") we strain to see if our wives and kids can be distinguished from the excited crowd. During our absence, many families moved across the country and resettled waiting for the ship to return. You have to admire the resilience and independence of those Navy wives who took charge and got things done!

It seems to take forever to moor our ship, get the accommodation ladders fixed to our sponson doors - and then, pandemonium! We're home!

Special thanks to both my C.O.s

Just before and during the world cruise, USS Coral Sea had two great commanding officers--both of whom went on to earn their admiral's stars. Captain Jerry Johnson did a bang-up job getting the ship ready for turnover to his relief, Captain J. D. "Bear" Taylor. Captain Taylor commanded the ship during the world cruise and, like Captain Johnson, was an inspirational leader and commander.

Bottom Line Reflections

Looking back now, I realize that the Navy gave me far more than a paycheck, a pension, or a career. It gave me something few people ever experience—the chance to see the world not through the window of an airliner or from the deck of a cruise ship, but from the flight deck of an American aircraft carrier.

I saw bustling Asian cities, ancient waterways, Mediterranean ports, and vast oceans that stretched beyond every horizon. More importantly, I learned that while the languages, customs, and landscapes may differ, people everywhere are remarkably alike. They love their families, take pride in their homes, and are curious about strangers. The old recruiting slogan promised that I could "Join the Navy and See the World." As it turned out, that was one promise the Navy kept.