



Life Aboard America's Aircraft Carriers

Seven Years deployed on the Navy's Floating Airfields

Part 2

From Enlisted Sailor to Warrant Officer

My transfer from *Intrepid* took me to Rhode Island, where I helped recommission Helicopter Anti-Submarine Squadron Seven. The squadron's mission was to detect and track submarines, a vital responsibility during the Cold War, when Soviet submarines posed a constant threat to American carrier groups and Atlantic shipping lanes.

While serving with the squadron, I was selected for appointment as a Warrant Officer. That promotion changed almost every aspect of my Navy life. I moved from enlisted berthing to the wardroom, exchanged dungarees for an officer's uniform, and took on a new level of responsibility. The change was significant, but the work ethic I had learned as an enlisted sailor remained just as important.

The squadron later deployed aboard **USS Wasp (CVS-9)** on a Northern European cruise. My view of carrier life was different now. I no longer stood in chow lines with the crew or slept in a crowded compartment, but I was still part of the same shipboard routine. Reveille still came at 0600, flight operations still dictated the tempo of the day, and every department still worked around the clock to keep the carrier functioning.

I changed my sleeping quarters to a six-man junior-officer bunk room. The Wasp still used a hydraulic catapult system. Unfortunately, the machine room for the system was near my berthing area. During night flight operations the machinery would activate with whirring hum. When the flightdeck controller activated the catapult, the hum became a scraping sound. The scraping sound ended with the actual launching, which sounded much like a collision between metal and concrete. Get the picture? This noise repeated until the launch was complete, frequently ruining everyone's sleep.

However, life in the wardroom was more comfortable, but it also carried expectations. Junior officers were expected to know their jobs, support their commanding officers, and accept responsibility when something went wrong. Rank provided privileges, but it also removed excuses.

USS Wasp and Northern Europe

The *Wasp* gave me my first experience of carrier operations as a warrant officer. *Wasp* was an older antisubmarine warfare carrier, smaller than the later attack carriers on which I would serve, but she carried the same sense of purpose and constant activity.

Our Northern European deployment took us into waters very different from the warmer climates I had known. The weather was often cold, gray, and rough, and the seas could make even a large carrier feel surprisingly small. The squadron's helicopters flew in demanding conditions while the ship maintained the steady rhythm of launches, recoveries, maintenance, training, and watchstanding.

Serving aboard *Wasp* also showed me how much an aircraft carrier depended on coordination between the ship's company and the embarked air wing. The sailors who navigated and maintained the ship and the aviators who operated from her deck had different chains of command, but neither could accomplish the mission without the other. A carrier was not simply a ship carrying airplanes. It was a partnership between two large organizations living and working in the same floating community.

It was also aboard *Wasp* that I began to understand how quickly a Navy career could change. Only a short time earlier, I had been an E-6 yeoman working below the flight deck on *Intrepid*. Now I was wearing an officer's uniform and learning to lead from an entirely different position.

USS Forrestal: The Supercarrier



WO1 Smothers on Forrestall flight deck

From *Wasp*, I received orders to **USS Forrestal (CVA-59)**, one of the Navy's first true supercarriers. She was larger, busier, and more complex than the carriers I had previously known. With the air wing aboard, nearly 5,000 people lived and worked within her hull, and every one of them contributed to the ship's mission.

Life aboard *Forrestal* was somewhat less gritty for officers, but the work was no easier. The larger ship brought greater administrative demands, more personnel, and a faster operational pace. There were always reports to prepare, inspections to support, training requirements to meet, and personnel problems to resolve.

I deployed aboard *Forrestal* to the Mediterranean at a time when the Cold War shaped nearly every naval operation. The carrier served not only as an airfield at sea but also as a visible symbol of American military power. Wherever we sailed, our presence carried a message.

The Mediterranean could be beautiful, but deployment life left little time for sightseeing. Long periods at sea were interrupted by brief port visits, and even those stops often included duty days, official functions, repairs, and preparations for getting underway again. A sailor could visit famous places and still spend most of his time looking at them from the ship.

By then I had become accustomed to the sounds and movements of carrier life. The roar of aircraft, the vibration of catapult launches, the clang of watertight doors, and the constant announcements over the 1MC became part of the background. Silence aboard a carrier could be more noticeable than noise.

The Longest Deployment

My longest deployment began aboard *Forrestal* on September 22, 1972, and ended on July 6, 1973—a total of nine months and fourteen days. I was a newly appointed Warrant Officer assigned as the ship's personnel officer, responsible for helping account for and manage a crew of thousands.

Personnel management at sea was a difficult task in the years before computers and electronic databases. The ship received printed manpower documents from Navy headquarters, but those reports were often already out of date by the time they reached us. Men transferred, advanced, reenlisted, became ill, or left the ship for emergency reasons, while new personnel arrived to replace them. Keeping the ship's official personnel account aligned with reality required constant attention.

I would have sold my soul for a laptop and a modern database, but I was about twenty years too early.

The work was not limited to numbers and reports. Before deployment, my office processed hardship reassignment requests from sailors whose families were facing serious problems. Many of those cases were compelling, but the needs of the Navy and the circumstances of thousands of other families had to be considered as well. Some requests were denied, while others remained undecided as the sailing date approached.

I often had to tell worried husbands that I could not leave them ashore while their cases were pending. It was one of the hardest parts of the job. The forms were administrative, but the consequences were deeply personal.

USS Coral Sea: Greater Responsibility



Lcdr Smothers at Pearl Harbor Arizona memorial 1983

My final aircraft carrier assignment was aboard **USS Coral Sea (CV-43)**. By then I had advanced well beyond the young Yeoman First Class who had first reported aboard *Intrepid*. On *Coral Sea*, I served in positions of substantial responsibility, including Repair Division Officer, Administrative Department Head, and Personnel Officer.

As Repair Division Officer, I was responsible for sailors who performed demanding maintenance and damage-control work throughout the ship. An aircraft carrier was a massive mechanical

organism, and something was always being repaired, inspected, tested, or replaced. Pipes leaked, equipment failed, metal corroded, and the ship's structure endured constant punishment from salt water, vibration, heat, and age.

The repair crews were among the unsung workers who kept the ship alive. They often worked in cramped, hot, dirty spaces far from the excitement of the flight deck, but without them the carrier could not have remained operational.

Later, as Administrative Department Head and Personnel Officer, my focus shifted back to people and paperwork on a much larger scale. I was responsible for helping manage the personnel readiness of approximately 2,500 members of the ship's company, while the total population approached 5,000 when the air wing was aboard.

The responsibility extended beyond simply knowing how many sailors were assigned. The ship had to have the right people, with the right training and ratings, in the right jobs. A carrier could not deploy effectively with too few technicians, engineers, cooks, medical personnel, air traffic controllers, or damage-control specialists. Every vacancy mattered.

By then I had moved from processing paperwork in the Captain's Office to advising senior officers and managing departments of my own. The progression was gradual, but looking back, the distance between those two roles seems enormous.

One Ship, Thousands of Lives

Managing personnel aboard a carrier taught me that every name on a roster represented an individual life. Each sailor had a family, ambitions, worries, debts, medical needs, and personal problems that did not disappear simply because the ship got underway.

A carrier might be a weapon of national power, but it was also a community of young men and women living under intense conditions. They worked long hours, stood watches at night, missed holidays, endured separations, and somehow maintained the humor that sailors have always used to survive difficult circumstances.

Some sailors thrived at sea. Others counted every day until they could go home. Many did both.

The Navy had to remain ready for war, but leaders also had to recognize the human cost of that readiness. That balance was never easy.

The Cost of Service

One number has stayed with me since I retired from the Navy.

When I added together the time I spent deployed aboard those four aircraft carriers, I discovered that I had been away from my wife and children for a combined total of nearly **seven years**. That realization surprised even me.

Those years represented birthdays, anniversaries, Christmas mornings, school programs, Little League games, family vacations, and countless ordinary moments that could never be recovered. Military families quietly bore those sacrifices alongside the service member. While we stood watches halfway around the world, our spouses paid bills, handled emergencies, attended parent-teacher conferences, repaired broken appliances, and raised children largely on their own.

My wife carried much of that burden without complaint. Like countless military spouses, she kept the family functioning while I was at sea and made it possible for me to continue my career.

A successful Navy career is never earned by the sailor alone. It is earned by the entire family.

More Than Steel and Airplanes

When most people think about aircraft carriers, they picture enormous warships launching high-performance aircraft into the sky.

When I think about aircraft carriers, I remember something different. I remember the shrill call to reveille at 0600. I remember climbing into a narrow rack after a long day, standing in chow lines with shipmates, drinking endless cups of coffee, and eagerly awaiting the COD aircraft carrying mail from home. I remember the deafening roar of steam catapults, the smell of welding smoke during shipyard overhauls, and the remarkable teamwork that made thousands of people function as a single organization.

I remember the transitions as well: from enlisted sailor to Warrant Officer, from crowded berthing compartments to the wardroom, and from processing papers in the Captain's Office to leading departments and accounting for thousands of sailors.

Most of all, I remember the people. During my career I watched the Navy evolve from typewriters, carbon paper, and handwritten letters to computers and satellite communications. Aircraft became faster, electronics more sophisticated, and weapons more capable. Yet one thing never changed. Every successful deployment still depended upon thousands of dedicated men and women doing their jobs professionally every day.

Whenever someone mentions an aircraft carrier today, I do not first think about steel, jet aircraft, or missiles. I think about the sailors, Marines, and aviators whose skill, discipline, and teamwork transformed those enormous ships into some of the most capable floating airfields ever built.

I count myself fortunate to have spent nearly a quarter century among them.