



The Sounds and Smells of a Carrier

I spent a good part of my Navy career aboard aircraft carriers, and more than fifty years later I can still remember how they sounded and smelled.

During the late 1960s through 1973, I served aboard USS *Intrepid*, USS *Forrestal*, and USS *Coral Sea*. For a brief period, after cross-decking from *Intrepid* as a newly appointed warrant officer, I also served with Helicopter Antisubmarine Squadron Seven (HS-7) aboard USS *Wasp*.

Every carrier had its own personality, but they shared certain sounds and smells that were unmistakably Navy.

The most obvious sounds came from the aircraft. A-4 Skyhawks and F-4 Phantoms were noisy enough just sitting on the flight deck, but when they launched, you didn't merely hear them. You felt them. SH-3 helicopters had their own distinctive sound as their big rotor blades beat the air.

There were also sounds inside the ship that became so familiar you hardly noticed them after a while.

One I never forgot came during my short stay aboard *Wasp*. My bunk room was near the hydraulic catapult machinery room. During nighttime flight operations, I would be in my bunk and hear the machinery begin to buzz. I knew what was coming next.

A few seconds later came a tremendous noise that sounded something like a collision.

Then things would settle down—until the next launch.

It probably wasn't the ideal arrangement for a good night's sleep, but sailors can learn to sleep through almost anything. After a while, that buzz followed by the crash became just another part of life aboard an aircraft carrier.

The smells were just as distinctive.

JP-5 jet fuel was everywhere around flight operations, and its exhaust had a smell you didn't forget. The hangar deck had its own mixture of aircraft, oil, hydraulic fluid, paint, metal, and machinery. Go farther down into the ship and you encountered the smells of a huge collection of moving parts that operated around the clock.

Berthing compartments smelled like the people who slept in them—and there were plenty of people sleeping in them. Showers and heads were constantly damp and could develop something of a swampy smell.

The mess decks were different. Depending upon the hour, you might smell bacon, coffee, cabbage, or whatever happened to be on the menu. Sometimes your nose told you what was for dinner before you ever reached the serving line.

But one shipboard smell stands apart from all the others.

I joined USS *Forrestal* several years after her disastrous 1967 flight-deck fire off the coast of Vietnam. The fire killed 134 sailors and badly damaged the ship. By the time I reported aboard, *Forrestal* had been repaired and returned to service. She was once again a fully operational aircraft carrier.

Yet I remember a lingering smell of conflagration in parts of the ship.

It wasn't overpowering. It was simply there—a faint burned smell that, to me, no amount of scrubbing, painting, or shipyard repair had completely banished. Knowing what had happened aboard *Forrestal* made that smell especially memorable.

Most of my memories of carrier life, however, are good ones.

A carrier was a busy place, filled with thousands of sailors doing their jobs. There were aircraft launching and recovering, announcements over the 1MC, machinery running somewhere behind the bulkheads, and the constant vibration of a large ship moving through the sea. Add the smell of JP-5, machinery, cooking, paint, salt air, and several thousand sailors, and you had an environment unlike anything on shore.

Our senses have a way of holding onto things long after we think we have forgotten them.

Today, I can still imagine that buzz outside my bunk aboard *Wasp* and the crash that followed. I can hear the jets aboard *Intrepid*, *Forrestal*, and *Coral Sea*. And I can still remember the peculiar mixture of smells found only aboard a Navy aircraft carrier.

I haven't lived aboard one for more than half a century.

But I think I would know that sound—and that smell—tomorrow.