

USS Hornet

On June 7th 1964, I started a thirty-nine day Third Class Orientation Tour at the US Air Force Academy (AFA) with six hundred and fifty classmates. During this program we visited selected units of the Army, Navy, and Air Force for indoctrination in the Major Commands of the Department of Defense. A highlight of the trip was spending one week on the Aircraft Carrier USS Hornet (CVA-12) observing flight operations.

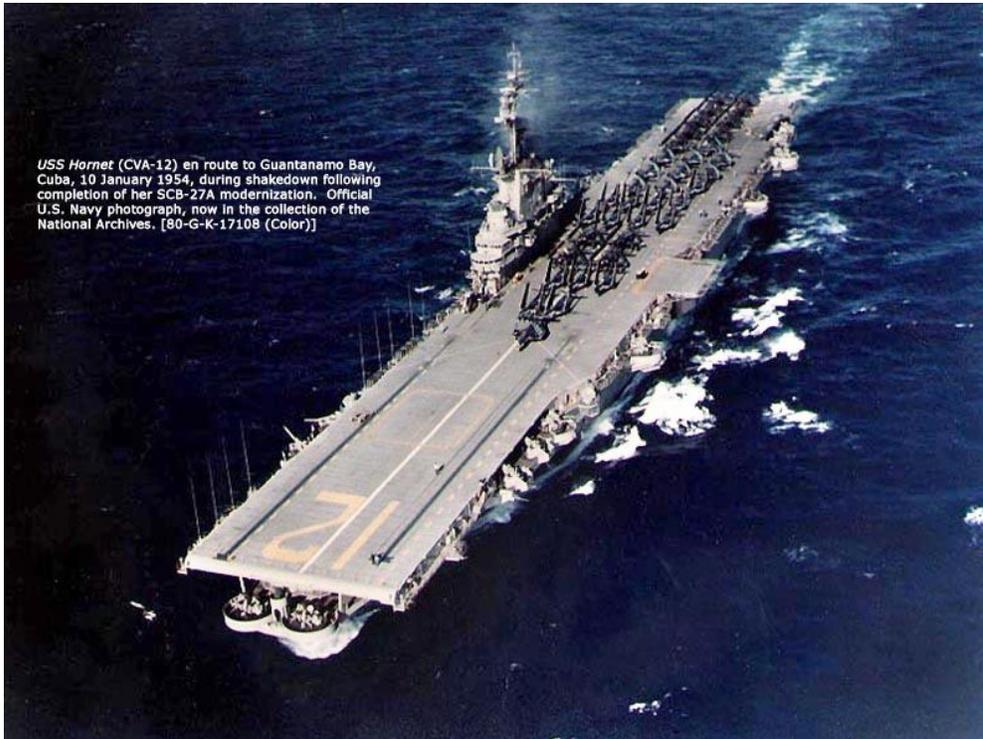
I was very fortunate that I had been rated very high militarily in my class at the end of our freshman year and was afforded Cadet Rank ahead of the majority of my classmates. Those who held rank were on Staff for the Orientation Tour. Being on Staff gave us a little more freedom of movement and allowed us first pick when there were assignment options. This became very important when we arrived at Long Beach Naval Station and the Staff got to choose which ship we would be assigned to. At that time, the Aircraft Carrier USS Hornet was the flagship for an anti-submarine warfare Task Force. In order to accommodate all the USAFA Cadets, the Navy made the Hornet, two Destroyers, and a Tender available for this orientation program. I chose to spend my week at sea on the Hornet.

The first thing we discovered after boarding ship was that we had been assigned berths in a compartment directly under the forward catapult. The first night out of port was pretty quiet, but then things changed. A couple of Naval Reserve Squadrons from Miramar Naval Air Station flew out to the ship for a week of day and night carrier operations. The Cadets got little sleep from then on. The second thing we learned was that the Cadets on Staff were expected to eat in the Officers Wardroom. After one day of pomp and ceremony, I abandoned the Wardroom and started eating in the Enlisted Men's Mess. The food was just as good, I didn't have to worry about making a social mistake or breaking something, and my digestive system enjoyed the change. One of the Navy Chiefs confided in me that they were all very happy to have the Cadets on board because, in our honor, all the meals were much better than usual.

I did find one thing of great interest in the Wardroom. They were able to get newspapers on an almost daily basis. I picked up one newspaper and the headline read MONTANA FLOOD. As I was from Montana I took great interest in the story. We hadn't had many floods of national importance in Montana, but it seemed that they had had a unique set of circumstances that year. A much higher than normal snow pack in the mountains got hit by a 100 year magnitude rainstorm. All the streams and rivers in the area were way over their banks and Choteau, Montana (my hometown) was at the center of this disaster. There were initial reports of bodies floating through town. This caused me to have some concern for my family, but I had to wait until we docked to make a phone call home. When I finally got through I was assured that everyone was perfectly fine. In fact, no one near Choteau had died in the flooding. However, a few pigs and cows did float away.

The USS Hornet had a Bridge for the Ship's Captain and right above it was a Bridge for the Task Force Admiral. The Captain of the Hornet had been designated the Commander of our four ship group so there was no Admiral assigned or on board. (For those who

don't know, a Navy Captain is an O-6 or equivalent of an Army, Air Force or Marine Colonel.) The Captain was very nice to us and opened the Admiral's Bridge 24 hours a day to the Cadets on Staff. In the Admiral's Bridge we could turn on the radar screens, plot maps, and all the other instruments that were available for use on an operating Bridge. At all times we were able to follow the progress of the ships in our group and all the planes involved in flight operations. It was educational and fascinating. Best of all, it was relatively quiet. I found that big stuffed chair to be about the most comfortable place on board the ship. Before the week was over, I was pretty much living on the Admiral's Bridge.



I imagine that Military Academy Cadets from all the services have similar character traits. Besides being quite intelligent and articulate, they seek adventure and love a challenge. They do not handle boredom well and extended boredom, anything over two days with nothing to do, causes the brain cells to work overtime on finding a means of relief. The constant noise from the catapults meant that they could not sleep so they went to other areas of the ship searching for peace and quiet or something to do. A few talked to the Chief's in charge of the various crews and got approval to tag along for a shift or two in order to gain a better appreciation for the different duties that had to be performed. The Cadets were quick studies and were able to perform the required duties with great skill. They also started bringing more and more of their buddies along. The numbers of Cadets working on the ship started getting quite high especially on the night shifts when it was harder to distinguish who was actually there. Before long the Chief's were letting some of their real crewmembers take shifts off in order to keep the number of on duty "crewmen" at a manageable level. Cadets were running all over the ship wearing every color slicker imaginable. All duty sections wore different colors; the plane handlers are

yellow or blue, the refueling crew is purple, etc., etc. It only took the Junior Officers a couple of days to figure out that there were people working the crews that they hadn't seen before. However, it didn't take those silver tongued Cadets much longer to co-op the Officers than it had the Chiefs.

Just before dark one evening about mid-way through the cruise, the Carrier suspended flight operations and took up a position off to one side of the two destroyers. Then we were able to watch an unbelievable show. The destroyers opened up with their big guns at targets on one of the Islands off the Southern California coast. From our position behind the guns it was possible to watch the rounds from the instant they left the guns, throughout their trajectory, all the way to the targets. It was amazing. After a brief intermission, as it got dark, the guns opened up again. That light show at night was even more spectacular than before. I must admit that my vantage point from the Admiral's Bridge made the show a whole lot better.

By the time our cruise was getting close to the end, almost all of the ship's crews, day and night, had a number of Cadets helping out. Everybody seemed happy, the Cadets were no longer bored, nothing had broken, the Navy guys were getting some extra days off, and I had become very comfortable in my new residence (the Admiral's Bridge). I had no trouble at all leaning back in that big stuffed chair and getting a good night's sleep. I had even acclimated to the point that I could just tune out the racket from flight operations. I was sure that the Captain was aware that I was spending most of my time in the Admiral's Bridge, but he had never even hinted that he didn't approve. About an hour after sunrise, on the next to last morning aboard ship, happy time on the USS Hornet came to an abrupt halt.

I was all cozy in the big stuffed chair about half way between sleep and awake. I had one eye half open lazily watching the next plane hooking up to the forward catapult, when the cork exploded out of that talker tube and I heard someone scream, "Mr. Rowley." Purely as a reflex action I flew out of that chair and had one hand on that tube before the cork had made it back to earth. Without even realizing that I had done so, I responded with a clear, confident, and meaningful "Yes Sir." Then I heard a loud, angry voice that sounded quite like the Captain's say, "Get down here." In about two seconds I was standing at attention just inside the Captain's Bridge. The Captain met me at the door and with a vice like grip grabbed me by the front of my uniform shirt with his left hand. In about two giant strides with me in tow he moved to the front windows of the Bridge and pointed down to the area where the Catapult Officer was in the process of prepping another plane for take-off. In a loud, questioning, confused, and angry voice he barked, "Who is that man?"

The "Catapult Officer" was in the process of giving that windup signal with his right hand extended in the air and the engines of the jet hooked to the catapult were screaming. I watched as the Catapult Officer and the pilot saluted each other and the Catapult Officer did that low bend over maneuver where his knee touches the deck and his right arm is fully extended, pointing toward the bow of the ship. I could not see his face because his back was toward us. However, just as his knee touched the deck, the jet sprang forward

toward its destiny at the end of the deck. The Catapult Officer remained fully extended until the jet had cleared the end of the ship, then he stood up and turned around. I knew right away that he was one of the USAFA Cadets on staff for the Orientation Tour, but I didn't know his name. Then I noticed that the Captain had been watching my face and had seen that look of recognition in my eyes. His eyes were boring holes through my head and he was waiting for an answer.

I told him that I did not know the man's name, but I was sure he was a Cadet. Still grasping my uniform, with me in tow, the Captain headed out of the Bridge, down the stairs, and out across the flight deck. As we passed the catapult controls location, the Captain stopped and stared at a Navy Officer down on the catwalk who was standing with one foot up on the rail, casually smoking a cigarette while watching the waves below. The Captain's appearance in that area of the ship had brought everything to a halt. No one was moving and no one was speaking. After what was probably only a couple of seconds, but seemed like an eternity, someone gave a clearing the throat kind of cough. The officer standing at the rail turned slightly noticing that everyone around him seemed to be at attention, then he saw the Captain. His body snapped straighter than a steel rod and the cigarette disappeared. I found out later, that this poor unfortunate gentleman was the real Catapult Officer. It was his job to insure that the planes were ready for flight before takeoff and that the catapult was operating correctly. Very few times in my life have I seen the face of a fellow human being so aptly signal, "I am dead meat." Before one word had been uttered, I already felt sorry for this man.

The awaited explosion finally came and the Captain screamed "What the hell is going on?" Then I noticed that the Executive Officer and the Air Boss were both standing beside me, also at attention. The Captain's anger was at a boiling point, and he was fighting an intense struggle to keep from losing it. As his eyes flashed from person to person in the group of sailors around him no one spoke. After another "eternity" the Captain's demeanor shifted from one of outright anger to more of resolve. He took on a look of someone with absolute authority that had concluded, "I will get my answer." He finally let go of the front of my shirt. To add emphasis by pointing directly at the Air Boss, the Captain instructed him to suspend air operations and to recover all planes immediately. Then he told the Exec to assemble the Senior Officers in the Wardroom, ASAP. As the Captain turned away from the assembled group, he looked me in the eye and gave me that "stay with me" gesture with his head, and we headed back to the Bridge.

When we entered the Bridge and the Captain took a seat, no one was moving or speaking. The quiet was overpowering. After a minute or two, he turned to me and quite calmly asked me to explain, if I could, what had been happening on his ship and why. I told him that it would be most difficult because if I left him with the wrong impression, some good men could be unjustly punished. He promised that he would try to be objective and asked me to continue. I talked about the problems encountered by the berthing situation and how the boredom issue had compounded that. The Cadets had not intentionally or knowingly caused safety problems, they had just wanted to learn what they could and keep busy in the process. He listened thoughtfully as I spoke and even nodded his head a

couple of times. When I finished, he turned back toward the window and sat quietly as if lost in thought. It was not long before the Exec entered the Bridge and informed the Captain that the Officers were assembled, and we headed for the Wardroom.

If anyone ever wanted to see a definition of serious, those twenty some men standing ramrod straight with chiseled expressions and caged but alert eyes were just that. I took up a position off to the side and hoped I would be forgotten. The Captain asked a couple of rhetorical questions about the consequences of using unauthorized and untrained individuals on the ship's crews and the liability of those actions had there been an accident of any magnitude. Then starting with the Exec he proceeded to chew about ten pounds of meat out of the rear end of every Officer assembled. I had been worked over by some of the best during my US Army days, but this Naval Captain was exceptionally proficient at the art of dressing down another human being. I started praying that he would exclude me from this part of the ordeal. After he tired of chewing, the Captain softened just a little and explained that he himself would have to accept the responsibility for what had happened. After giving it some thought, he had recognized that not enough pre-planning had gone into how the Cadets would be dealt with while they were on board the ships. They should have been given better quarters and there should have been a system in place to keep them busy.

The Captain gave out some orders for completing Air Operations and returning the Squadrons to Miramar NAS, and then he advised that the Cadets should not be utilized further on any of the Ship's crews. In conclusion he indicated that his official report about what had happened would reflect that it had been his lack of foresight that had been responsible for any improper activities involving the Cadets during their tour aboard the USS Hornet. As the assembled Officers were dismissed, the Captain advised the Exec that they did have to discuss a couple of issues that had come up, like the conduct of the Catapult Officer. The Captain came over to me, thanked me for my help, and advised that I could return to the Admiral's Bridge if I would like. As I departed the Wardroom, I glanced over at a few of the Officers standing nearby. They all had that look of a group of convicted prisoners who had, at the last minute, been given a reprieve from the death sentence.

Our last night on the Hornet was a subdued one. The Cadets were treated with the utmost respect from every officer and seaman onboard, but the comradeship of the last few days was gone. With the welcome mats rolled up in the other areas of the ship, most of the Cadets spent the night in their assigned compartment below the forward catapult. At least it was quiet with all the planes gone. Before noon the next day we were docked back at Long Beach Naval Station, had disembarked from the Hornet, and had boarded buses to take us toward our next assigned victims on the Orientation Tour.

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