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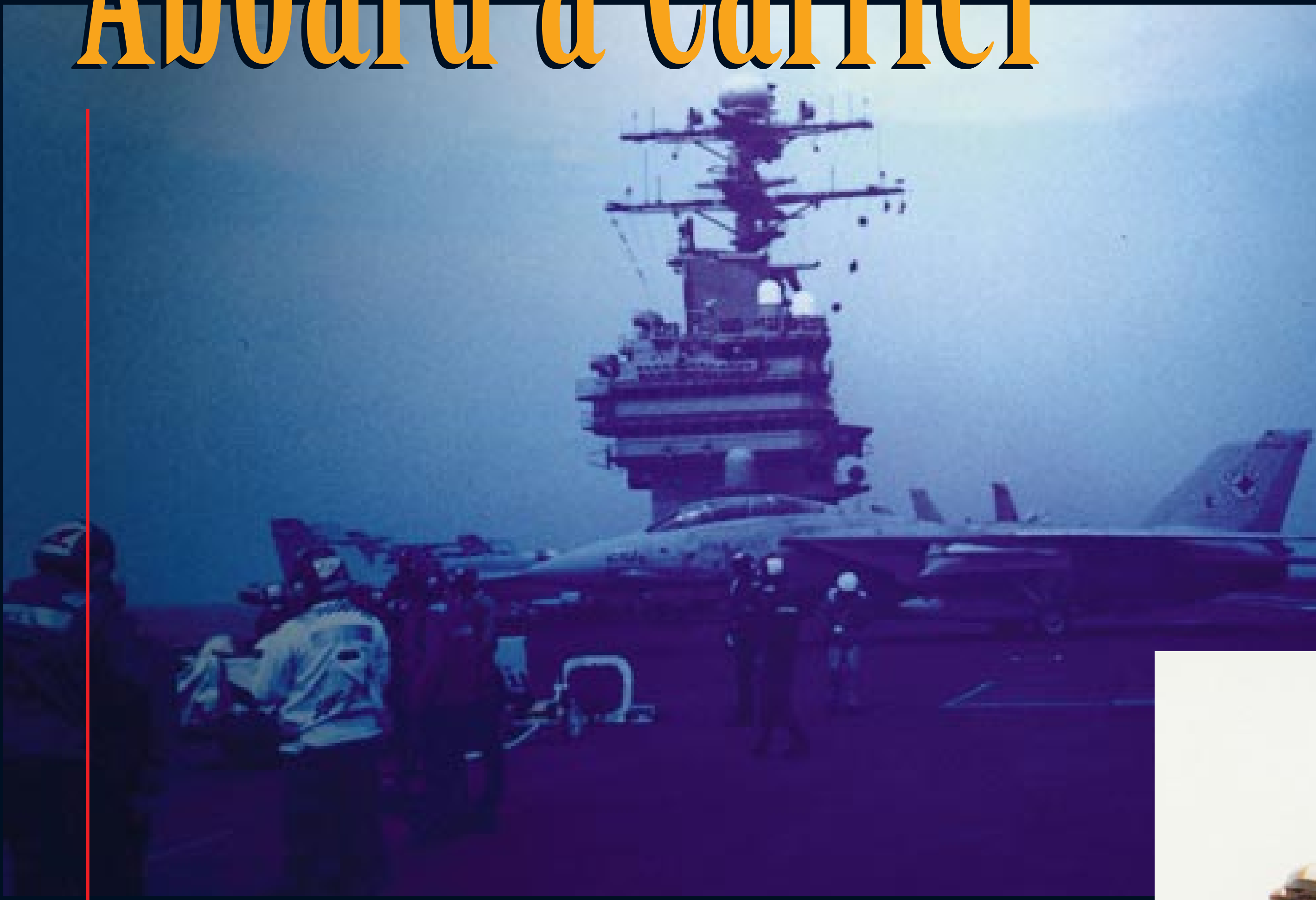
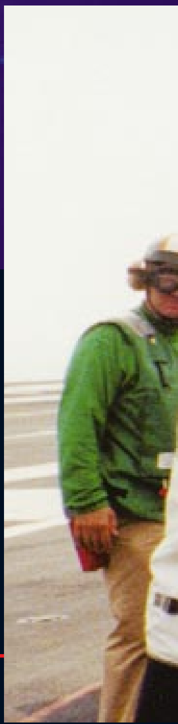
Decision Makers Expe
Aboard a Carrier



William Marck



By Mark E. Gindele

ience Life

Deployment on board an aircraft carrier is a unique experience. In order to understand the complexities of shipboard life, a group of Washington decision makers wanted a personal view of Naval Aviation personnel doing what they do best. On 30 and 31 August 1998 *Theodore Roosevelt* (CVN 71) hosted the congressional staff supporting Congressman Jim Saxton of New Jersey, a member of the House National Security Committee; and Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Navy, Air Programs William Stussie and his guests from Naval Air Warfare Center Aircraft Division (NAWCAD) Lakehurst, N.J. The group visited *TR* to personally see how the Navy does its job, and to learn what they can do to support it.

"It is important for us to see things as they actually are," said one staffer. "We want to see the impact that downsizing and decreasing budgets has on the warfighter. Recently there have been a lot of negative stories about low pay, lack of spare parts and morale. We need to examine these issues firsthand and report back to Congress so that adjustments can be made to budgets and plans."

William Marck

Opposite, *Theodore Roosevelt* (CVN 71) prepares for flight operations. Above, congressional staffers don flight deck gear to gain close-up experience of life aboard a carrier.

William Marck

Visitors get a quick aviation maintenance lesson below decks in the Aircraft Intermediate Maintenance Department.

Richard Headley, head of manufacturing at NAWC Lakehurst, explained the purpose of their visit: "At Lakehurst, we constantly ask the question, 'How does this help the fleet?' If we can't answer the question quickly and easily, we don't do it. Resources are scarce and it is our responsibility to keep the fleet carriers' equipment operational at all times."

The group started its excursion at NAS Norfolk, Va., boarding a C-2A *Greyhound* carrier-onboard-delivery aircraft. Many of the guests experienced their first "trap" as they landed on board *TR* in the Atlantic. It wasn't long into the ship's tour that one of the visitors emphasized, "We don't want a briefing on carrier operations, we want the experience. Show us the real world of Sailors in the fleet."

TR's skipper at the time, Captain David Architzel, responded, "Show them how we do it."

On the flight deck, between the number 1 and 2 catapults, the visitors could see the aircraft taxiing through the thick clouds of steam pouring from catapults and rippling heat from jet blast. As they faced aft from the bow of the ship, an F-14 *Tomcat* was parked. They watched airmen work like a pit crew at the Indy 500 making their final checks and adjustments as the *Tomcat* was attached to the catapult. The observers crouched as the jet blast deflector rose behind the plane. In a thunderous climax, the F-14 shot past them and banked off into the horizon. "The only thing worse than the noise level was the intense heat and vibration," said Headley. "No wonder they call carriers the most dangerous four acres in the world."

Next, the guests proceeded to the catapult control room directly beneath the flight deck. In oppressively high temperatures, the ship's crew explained how the steam-driven system is designed to adjust its power depending on the different types of aircraft. "Too much or too little," an aviation boatswain's mate stated, "and you lose a $50 million aircraft."

Navigating the maze of passageways, the visitors emerged back on the flight deck all the way aft at the landing signal officer's (LSO) platform. From this position, the LSO talks to the pilots to help guide them in and grades each landing. To accentuate the dangers of the position, the LSO on duty pointed out a hole in the deck. "The tube to my right is what the LSO jumps into in the event of an emergency. The other end of the tube opens up a couple of decks down."

The LSO then turned his attention to an F/A-18C *Hornet* which he observed through his binoculars. As the LSO gave commands into his microphone, the aircraft's wings dipped slightly to the left and right making adjustments for the approach. Within moments, the *Hornet's* tailhook sparked against the nonskid deck and caught the arresting cable. It stopped in a blink of an eye.

The tour continued throughout the ship, giving everyone a thorough look at life aboard a *Nimitz*-class carrier. "It is amazing when you see that these military personnel are so well trained," said Richard Rumpf, former Assistant Secretary of the Navy for Research, Development and Systems. "The level of responsibility cannot be compared to any job in the private sector. I wish all of America could see how hard this crew works."

Rear Admiral William W. Copeland, Jr., the carrier battle group commander, explained, "These Sailors are training for war. Nothing else. They know their jobs and what they have to do. They also know the consequences to others and the carrier if they fail. Our support structure enables these Sailors to focus on the important issues."

According to Congressman Saxton, the trip was extremely beneficial: "My staff gained a wealth of information related to myriad activities, including how overall procedures are implemented, how equipment is operated and maintained, how work centers are dependent upon each other, and how the aircraft carrier team plays an instrumental role in the battle group."

Saxton summed up the importance of the visit, "The trip highlighted the fact that the aircraft carrier environment depends heavily upon the dedication of each Sailor at every level of the organization. Quality of life is a crucial concern of all the services and has subsequently become the focus of many hearings in the House National Security Committee. Sea duty places an exceptional level of pressure on Navy personnel. My staff was clearly able to see the value in related morale, welfare and recreation issues."

As the guests boarded the C-2 to return home, they now understood how many people it takes working in unison to complete the mission. Even though they could see little outside the aircraft's two windows, they could imagine the scenario taking shape: Flight deck control places a marker on the aircraft's cutout on a miniature flight deck to indicate its props are rotating. Someone in a purple turtleneck removes the fueling hose and takes a sample to test the fuel's purity. Two "brown shirts" remove the chains tying the *Greyhound* to the flight deck pad eyes. The plane captain directs the aircraft through the pandemonium to the number three "cat." The steam-driven catapult pulls back and attaches to the plane's front wheel assembly. The propellers' crescendo is the only sound heard, followed by a moment of anticipation. The force of the launch crushes everyone's body against their safety harnesses, but it only lasts for a moment.

The experience is complete.

Mr. Gindele is a manager in the Prototyping and Manufacturing Department at NAWCAD Lakehurst, N.J

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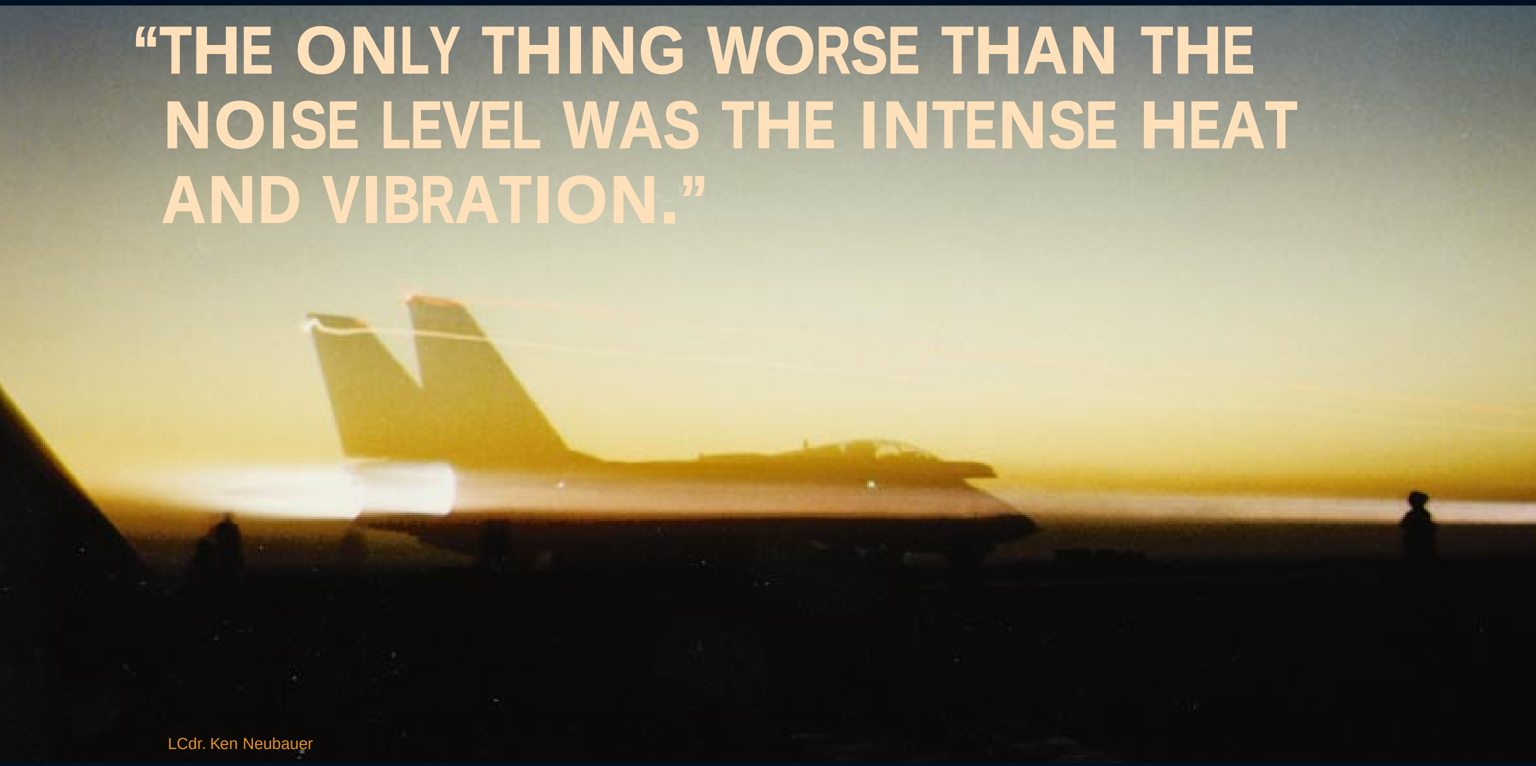

LCdr. Ken Neubauer