

Life Aboard an Aircraft Carrier
by
LCDR C. W. "Tex" Holland, USN, (Ret)

"NOW HEAR THIS, REVEILLE!! REVEILLE, FOR ALL AIR DEPARTMENTS AND AIR GROUP

PERSONNEL." This is a familiar sound that has been heard aboard aircraft carriers for the past seven decades. The words and the objectives have remained the same but the means to accomplish these objectives have changed dramatically. The one thing that has not changed, however, is the strong feeling and desire that naval aviators, flight officers and other aviation personnel have for the opportunity to serve on those "Flattops." One might wonder why this type of duty is so desirable and sought after when there are other assignments that would be less demanding of one's time, less taxing on one's professional abilities and perhaps somewhat less dangerous. Aircraft Carrier duty is more challenging than any other aviation assignment. Ingredients seldom mentioned are courage, and the satisfaction of knowing that this challenge has been met and conquered. Duties on an Aircraft Carrier require an extreme sense of devotion and an extraordinary amount of talent with little margin for error. It is this challenge that attracts so many to the hazardous duty on the flight deck. Every "Plane Pusher's" dream is to turn in the blue shirt for the yellow shirt of a Flight Deck Director and have that whistle around his neck. The catapult crew consists of men who are responsible for attaching the bridle and placing the proper tension bar in the holdback cable prior to launching an aircraft. This is extremely dangerous and requires precision teamwork. These dangers are known to everyone in the crew but there is always a waiting list of men who would exchange a week's liberty in Cannes for the opportunity to join that crew.

By the time "Flight Quarters" has sounded, the flight deck crew has already gathered at Flight Deck Control to finalize plans for the spotting of aircraft for the first launch. This is based on "Up" aircraft, flight schedules provided by the respective squadrons/detachments, and fuel load and armament requirements. Soon the aircraft are re-spotted and the announcement from Pri-Fly to each squadron ready room, "Pilots Man Planes" is heard and off to the flight deck rush the flight crews. After a thorough visual inspection of the exterior of the plane, the crews are strapped in their seats and await further instructions. This is followed shortly by the word from the Air Boss to "Start Engines" and soon the quietness of the early morning has given way to the sound of the powerful jet engines that develop up to 28,000 pounds of thrust each. The pilot's eyes are glued to the signals of the flight deck director who guides him into the exact position for the crew to attach the plane to the shuttle hook for launching. Then, the anticipated words, "Prepare to launch Aircraft" is heard as the Carrier is turned into the wind. The director then signals the pilot that he is now under the control of the Catapult Officer who, after receiving the salute

from the pilot indicating that he is ready to be launched, gives the distinctive signal that sends the aircraft down the shuttle track and into the air.

Within seconds after the last sortie is airborne, then flight deck crew begins the re-spot for the next scheduled launch cycle which is about one hour away. After the second scheduled launch is complete, the arresting gear crew readies the deck for the returning planes from the previous flight and the word, "Stand by to recover aircraft," is heard from Pri-fly. One by one the planes are trapped. As the pilot taxis by Flight Deck Control he signals that his plane is either "Up" or "Down." This signal dictates where the plane is ultimately parked and secured until the following re-spot and launch cycle begins. With the last plane trapped, the cycle repeats itself again and again until late into the night. At long last the Bos'n Mate of the Watch is heard to say, "NOW HEAR THIS!! SECURE FROM FLIGHT QUARTERS, SET THE REGULAR AIR DEPARTMENT INTEGRITY WATCH." The squadron maintenance crews then feverishly begin the task of getting the planes ready for the next day's operations.

There are very few, if any, crewmen on the Aircraft Carrier whose duties are not affected in some way by the activities that occur during Flight Quarters.

During the late 1950s Aircraft Carriers began serving meals 21 of 24 hours each day while at sea. This proved beneficial for two reasons: first of all, each individual had the opportunity to eat at his convenience based on the dictates of his duties, and secondly, a significant monetary savings was realized since a greater portion of the prepared food was consumed and less was discarded. The Engineering Department is responsible for providing additional steam for operation of the catapults and electrical power for the elevators. The Supply Department personnel are constantly reviewing their records for aircraft parts, not just for the embarked air group, but for others in the fleet as well. The Medical and Dental Departments juggle their office hours to fit the needs of those aviation personnel whose duties require them to seek care outside normal working hours. The Navigation Department's duties are modified significantly due to the nature of the operation of the Carrier. The Operations Department plays a major role in every aspect of the air group's flight scheduling and the execution of those schedules. The Weapons and Gunnery/Ordnance Divisions are responsible for the weapons loading on every flight involving ordnance of any kind.

One of the most significant improvements in carrier aviation was the inception of the angled flight deck. The USS ANTIETAM was the first Carrier to be so modified. The first landing during the initial test on 12 January 1953 was made by the Commanding Officer, CAPT S.G. Mitchell in an SNJ. This, and subsequent tests proved so successful that in September 1953 the decision was made to utilize this concept on all the MIDWAY class Carriers. In

addition to the angled deck, they were also outfitted with the C-11 steam catapult, which was far superior to the H-8 catapults used prior to the conversion. The angled deck not only permitted simultaneous takeoffs and landings, but greatly improved safety during landings. This concept eliminated the need for the use of barricades during landings which expedited aircraft recovery. Not since 16 June 1926 when emergency barricades were placed on the flight deck of the USS LANGLEY had the navy made such drastic progress in improving safety on the flight decks of our Carriers.

The 1960s proved to be a decade of outstanding progress in carrier aviation in many ways, such as the development of the angled deck, the steam catapult and the introduction of the mirror landing system. The operational evaluation of the new landing aid began 22 August 1955 when CDR R. G. Dose, Commanding Officer of VX-3, made a landing on the USS BENNINGTON utilizing this system. It proved so successful that all Carriers were soon outfitted with this latest landing aid. All three of these new innovations have played a major role in reducing flight deck accidents and increasing the confidence level of pilots, especially during night landings.

Aircraft Carrier duty is not “All work and no play” as everyone has experienced. After several days at sea, undergoing every type training exercise in the manual, and launching and recovering aircraft under every condition expected to be encountered, the anchor is finally dropped. While steaming around the world our Aircraft Carriers have played host to Kings, Queens, Potentates and Princes of foreign nations. On 10 January 1954, Generalissimo Chaing Kai-shek spent four hours on board the USS WASP (CVA-18) observing simulated air war maneuvers. A few weeks later President Ramon Magsaysay of the Republic of the Philippines spent several hours on board as a guest of American Ambassador Raymond A. Spruance.

The Aircraft Carrier has influenced the outcome of global warfare more than any other weapon in history. Today it carries the major burden of instant reaction and defense around the world and with these sterling qualities it is fitting that this marvelous Memorial to all Aircraft Carriers be dedicated here today.

Courtesy of LCDR C. W. “Tex” Holland, USN, (Ret)
USS WASP (CV/CVA/ CVS 18) Association.

Submitted by,
YNCS Don Harribine, USN(Ret)