

A photograph of a fighter jet on the deck of the USS George H.W. Bush. The jet is the central focus, viewed from the front. The deck is dark, and the sea is visible in the background under a hazy sky. The text is overlaid on the image.

GEOFF DYER

ANOTHER

GREAT DAY AT

SEA

**LIFE ABOARD THE USS
GEORGE H.W. BUSH**

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ANOTHER GREAT DAY AT SEA

Life Aboard the USS George H.W. Bush

GEOFF DYER

With Photographs by Chris Steele-Perkins



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In loving memory

Phyllis 'Mary' Dyer

27 July 1925–29 June 2011

Arthur 'John' Dyer

30 November 1919–30 November 2011

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We were going to be flying to the carrier from the US Navy base in Bahrain on a Grumman C-2A Greyhound: an ungainly propeller plane, more war- or work-horse than greyhound. There was nothing sleek or speedy about it. The sky was doing what it always did at this time of day—waiting for the sun to show up. The sun is the only thing that happens to the sky in this part of the world—that and the stars which were nowhere to be seen. The temperature was pleasant; a few hours from now it would be infernal. Sixteen passengers, all Navy except for me and the snapper, gathered round the back of the Greyhound—also known as a CO (Carrier Onboard Delivery)—listening to the safety briefing. Our luggage had been weighed and taken away for loading. Despite my protests, I had to hand over my computer bag as well, something I'd never let happen before. It had to be stowed because when we landed on the carrier, when the plane touched down and hooked the arresting wire, we would go from 140 mph to 0 mph in a couple of seconds: the trap, the first of many words that I heard for the first time, or rather the first of many times that I heard a familiar word used in a completely new way. I knew what the trap referred and pertained to—the hook, the arresting wire—but was unsure how to use it. Did we *make* the trap? *Hit* the trap? *Come in for* the trap? The trap: it existed in isolation from other words, abruptly and permanently arrested from the normal momentum of syntax.

Then there was the word 'cranial': in this context not an adjective (as in massage) but a noun referring to the head-, ear- and eye-protectors that were handed out for the flight. Unnoticed, I noticed now, the sky had brightened from grey to blue. We put on our floor mats, coats, carried our cranials and filed onto the plane. There were two seats on either side of the aisle—all facing backwards—and two windows on either side of the fuselage, each the size of a dinner plate. It was not the sort of environment in which one could complain about the lack of leg room, though that was one of the striking features of this aircraft. Others were fuming and noise.

The ramp we'd walked up winched itself closed and sealed us in. Further safety checks were made. This involved shining a torch as though to see if there were holes in the fuselage. There must have been more to it than that but holes in a fuselage are good things to check for, obviously. The woman who made these checks was the military equivalent of a flight attendant. She was wearing a sand-coloured flight suit, looked as tough as a woman in an Annie Proulx story. There was nothing of the trolley dolly—nothing 'Chicken or beef?' or 'Doors to manual'—about her, but when she sat down in front of me, prior to take-off, I saw that her hair had been plaited and pinned into a tight bun on the back of her head. The Navy allowed women to keep their hair long. I wasn't surprised, exactly, just pleased that's how things were.

We were not taxiing but a noisy increase in power had taken place and the noise was deafening. I'd thought the noise was deafening when we'd first boarded but back then I didn't know anything about noise or deafeningness. It sounded like the flight of the *Phoenix*. Feared like it too—even though we were not actually moving, let alone flying. This was the moment

evidently, to put on my ear-pinching cranial. Having done that I sat there, strapped tight, struck by the undisguised use of the rivet in the seat in front. Everything in the plane was ripped, scuffed, scratched, stripped. Tubes, pipes, cables and superstructure were all laid bare. Commercial passenger planes from the world's poorest countries outdid this one when it came to frills; even to compare this plane to anything in the fleets of the budget airlines of the West would give a distorting impression of luxury. Passenger comfort was not a factor in any part of the design process.

Having worked itself up to a state of unstoppable intensity the plane accelerated along the runway for so long it seemed that we were attempting the logically impossible: driving overland to the carrier. At last the ground—glimpsed, through the window just behind and to my left—dropped away. We flew over a blur of Gulf but it was neck-achingly awkward, craning backwards to look through the porthole, so I reverted to sitting tight in this silent, noisy, vibrating, heavily laden tube, studying rivet patterns.

After forty minutes the bumpy ride became jumpier still as we descended, bucking the bronco air. There was a stomach-draining lurch and heave. We were land—no we weren't! The flight attendant's arm came up in a spiralling lasso gesture to indicate that we had missed the arresting wire and were bolting: going up and around again.

We circled and tilted round, descended again. This time we thumped down and came to a dead stop. Instantly. It was sudden, but not as violent as I'd expected and feared—possibly because we were facing backwards and so were forced into our seats rather than thrown forward and out of them.

The ramp-hatch at the back of the plane was lowered to reveal that we had landed on another world—albeit a world with the same pure blue sky as the one we had left. Rotating radars, an American flag, the island (another old-new word, referring to the bridge and assorted flight-ops rooms rising in a stack from one side of the deck: an island on the island of the carrier). The hatch continued to inch its way down, revealing the flight deck itself, populated by vizor-faced beings in red, green, white, yellow jerseys and float coats. Parked jets—F-18s—and helicopters.

We were here. We had arrived on carrier-world.

I have never known anything like the suddenness of this change. Compare it with the experience of flying from London and landing in Bombay—from freezing winter to eighty-degree heat—at two in the morning in January. Even a change as dramatic as that is gradual: a nine-hour flight; a long and slow descent; taxiing round the airport to the gate; immigration, baggage claim, leaving the terminal. Typically it's an hour and a half before you find yourself out in the Indian night with its smell of wood smoke and the sense of vast numbers of people still asleep. Whereas here, one moment we were travelling at 140 mph and the next we had stopped, the hatch opened and we had entered another world with its own rules, culture, norms and purposes.

The black-vizored people were either looking our way or scurrying, or lounging or gesturing. Three, in white jerseys and float coats, stepped onto the ramp and told us to follow in single file. They must have been yelling because we stepped out into a silent world—I had not realized until now how effectively the cranials' ear protection worked—in which steam curled and floated along part of the deck. The air was heavy with the smell of jet fuel. He

blared from the sky and bounced up off the deck. Three more cranial-headed guys in brown jerseys and trousers were swathed in heavy chains like mechanics in the Middle Ages, in charge of a siege engine. We wanted to dawdle but had entered a dawdle-less and urgent world where you do what you are told which was to walk single file to the catwalk at the edge of the deck and then down the steps to the Air Transfer Office (ATO). Already crowded with people preparing to depart, it was soon full to the brim with those who had just arrived.

Ensign Paul Newell, who would be chaperoning us around the boat, squeezed into the room and introduced himself. Always nice to be greeted in an alien world! Especially when the greeter is as friendly, smiling and welcoming as Paul. It was like being met at a resort conveniently located right under the local airport, with a welcome drink and a garland of flowers to hang around your neck—except there were neither drinks nor garlands. He was wearing a white jersey and sporting something that I would come to recognize as a not uncommon feature of life on the carrier: a form of moustache that has become almost entirely extinct in civilian life. Not an obsolete RAF handlebar extravaganza, just a little under-the-nose, over-the-lip number that had no desire to take itself seriously, that spent most of its time in a state of discreet embarrassment at the mere fact of its continued meagre existence.

We were ready to go—but we were not ready to go. I had been making notes on the Greyhound and rather than hanging on to my notebook had obediently handed it over to the flight attendant who, as we were about to begin that aborted first descent, chucked it into a kit bag with stuff from other passengers. And it had gone missing. So Paul had to set off on a stationery search and rescue. Why hadn't I just crammed it in my pocket? Because I did as I was told. But by doing as I was told I displayed a lack of initiative which was now delaying—possibly even jeopardizing—the mission.

The other new arrivals were taken to their quarters and those leaving the carrier were escorted onto the flight deck. By the time Paul returned, the snapper and I were the only people left.

'This is all there was,' said Paul. He was holding not a sturdy Moleskine notebook of the type allegedly used and mythologized by Chatwin and Hemingway but a flimsy school exercise book with a green cover and some kiddie's scrawl on the inside pages.

'That's it!' I said, glad to have my vocational identity reestablished.

Now we *were* ready to go. Which meant we were ready to begin traipsing through endless walkways, hatches and doorways, some raised up a few inches (knee-knockers), some at floor level. It was like a tunnel of mirrors, and the snapper, naturally, was keen to get a shot of this infinite corridor. That would have to wait. Every ten feet there was one of these open hatches and there was always someone either standing aside for us to go through or walking through as we stood aside—the former, usually. Being a civilian and therefore without rank meant that I was treated as though I outranked everyone. This willingness to step aside, to let me pass, was a demonstration, at the level of courtesy, of a larger point: they were willing to lay down their lives for me, for us. Had the order come to abandon ship I would have been escorted, firmly and courteously, to the first available lifeboat *because I was a civilian*. As we moved as people stepping aside—one of them with a healing cut across the bridge of his nose and the remains of a black eye—there were always people cleaning. Everywhere you went, down every walkway and stairwell, sailors were washing, wiping, rinsing, dusting, sweeping

scrubbing, brushing, buffing, polishing, shining.

Personally, I spent the rest of my time on the carrier ducking and diving or, more exactly, ducking and stooping. I walked the walkways and stoop-ducked through hatches, always focused on a single ambition: not to smash my head even though there was an opportunity to do so every couple of seconds. It was like staying in a cottage in Wales that had been epically extended and converted to nuclear power. Every time I pulled myself up to full height I was at risk. So I bobbed and weaved, ducked and stooped.

The older one gets the more obvious it becomes that the advantages of being short in this little life greatly outweigh the mythic benefits of being tall. In exchange for a slight edge when serving at tennis and being attractive to tall women (or so we delude ourselves) we spend our time folding our limbs into cars and planes and generally smashing our brains out. My fourteen days on the boat were the stoopingest I have ever spent, fourteen days that rendered the Alexander Technique obsolete, and made nonsense of the idea of good posture. Was I the tallest person on the boat? (Did the Navy have a maximum height requirement the way the police or the Army had a minimum one? If so was this ceiling height reduced further under the notoriously cramped conditions of a submarine?)

After five minutes of knee-knock and stoop-walk we arrived at my stateroom. Note the possessive pronoun. Not 'our', 'my'; singular, not plural. *I* was taken to *my* room. The idea of sharing a room had so filled me with dread that, right from the start, I had been lobbying for solitary confinement. That would not be possible, I was told: the snapper and I would share a room with Ensign Newell and three other officers. Six in a room! But we writers need a room of one's own, I claimed, trusting that any grammatical damage would be more than offset—the eyes of the Navy—by the Virginia Woolf allusion. I like to write at night, I went on, and the sound of my typing would disturb other people. No need to worry about that, came the jaunty response. With jets taking off and landing you become adept at filtering out noise, so a bit of tapping won't disturb anyone. It's not just the typing, I replied (via the mediators who were arranging my stay on the boat). My prostate is shot to hell. I need to pee at least twice a night. What he needs to understand, came the Navy's reply, is that space is extremely limited. Enlisted men and women are in berths of up to two hundred so to be in a room for six is an enormous privilege. What they need to understand, I replied, is that I'm too old to share. I'll go nuts if I have to share. I grew up with no brothers and no sisters. I am constitutionally incapable of sharing. My wife complains about it all the time, I said. Basically, only the Captain and a few other people in positions of high command have their own rooms, came the stern rebuke. Well, maybe I could take the Captain's room and he could move in with Newell and the boys for a fortnight, you know, reconnect with the masses, I emailed back (to my mediator, not intending this to go any further). As the time for my deployment drew near I tried to reconcile myself to the inevitability of sharing a room—even bought a pair of striped pyjamas—but found it impossible to do so.

Imagine my relief, then, when I was shown to the Vice-Presidential Room in a special little VIP corridor of 'guest suites'. I had got my own room through sheer determination and force of will. I had taken on the might of the US Navy and won. Newell escorted the snapper to their shared quarters, said they'd be back in fifteen minutes, but I didn't give a toss about the snapper: he could have been sleeping out in the open, under the stars on the flight deck, for

all I cared. The important thing was that he wasn't sleeping here, with me, even though there was a spare bunk (or rack, as they say in the Navy). That would have been the worst outcome of all: sharing with the snapper, or any *one* for that matter. Sharing a room with one person is worse than sharing with six and sharing with six is in some ways worse than sharing with sixty. But to be here on one's own ... to have this lovely little room—with a desk, a comfy chair, a basin (for washing in and peeing in at night) and a copy of George Bush Sr.'s daughter's memoir of her dad—was bliss. There was even a thick towelling robe—jeez, it was practically the honeymoon suite, a place where a man could devote himself single-handedly to the maritime art of masturbation.

There was one small problem and it became obvious when I'd been in the room for about three minutes. The crash and thunder of jets taking off. Good God! A roar, a crash and then the massive sound of the catapult rewinding itself or whatever it did. The most irritating noise in my street in London is an occasional leaf-blower. You know how loud—how maddening—that is? The noise here made a leaf-blower sound like leaves in a breeze, the kind of ambient CD played during a crystal-healing or reiki session. This was like a train rumbling overhead. It was nothing like a train rumbling overhead; it was like a jet taking off overhead—or *in* one's head. It was a noise beyond metaphor. Anything other than what it actually was diminished what it was. It was inconceivably noisy but the noise of jets taking off was as nothing compared with the noise of jets *landing*. I thought the ceiling was going to come in. And then there was the shock of the arresting gear doing its business, so that the initial wallop and roar overhead was followed by a massive ratcheting jolt that tore through the whole ship. I knew I was one floor down, directly below the flight deck, and although I wasn't able to work out exactly which noise meant what it seemed that my room was precisely underneath the spot where most planes hit the deck.

How was I ever going to get a night's sleep? Especially since—as Newell explained when he and the snapper came back—this went on all night. I would be here two weeks. I would not get a minute's sleep. Was it the same where they were? No, they were two floors down. Newell said. You could still hear the jets but it wasn't anything like as noisy as here. We were yelling at the top of our voices, not quarrelling, just trying to make ourselves heard.

'And this goes on all night?' I yelled, repeating as a question what I'd just been told.

'Round the clock. It's an aircraft carrier. We're sort of in the business of flying aircraft.'

'Is there still a spare bunk in your room?' I said, not knowing if I was joking. I was torn between relief at having my own room and anxiety about what having my own room entailed.

'You'll get used to it,' said Newell. That's where you're wrong, I wanted to yell back. The essence of my character is an inability to get used to things. This, in fact, is the one thing I *have* grown accustomed to: an inability to get used to things. As soon as I hear that there is something to get used to I know that I won't; I sort of pledge myself to not getting used to it. There wasn't time to yell all this; we had to complete a bunch of forms because, like a man driven mad by people in the apartment upstairs playing thrash metal, I was going right back up to the source of the racket, to the flight deck.

With the paperwork taken care of we stopped off for a safety briefing at the empty ATO—the ATO shack as it was always known—where we were handed cranials and float coats again.

The shaven-headed duty officer showed us a plan of the deck, emphasized the importance of sticking close to our escorts, of doing exactly what—and going exactly where—we were told. All pockets were to be buttoned or zippered shut. No loose bits and pieces that could fall away. I could use a notebook and pen but had to make sure that I was holding on to them firmly, not pulling them in and out of my pocket the whole time. And watch out for things you can trip over—there are plenty of them. Any questions?

Loads! But there was no time to ask them. We trooped back up the narrow stairs to the catwalk and were back in the silent world of the flight deck. The empty sea glittered like a brochure ('Ever Dreamed of Holidaying on an Aircraft Carrier?'). The sky was a blue blue greasy with the reek of fuel (something the tour operators didn't publicize). And there was something dreamlike about it: the cranial silence, for one thing, gave the visual—already heightened by the pristine light—an added sharpness. It wasn't just that the aircraft carrier was another world—the flight deck was a world apart from the rest of the carrier. And everything that happened elsewhere on the carrier had meaning and importance only in terms of what was happening here. Take away the flight deck and the planes and all you've got is a very big boat.

There was a lot to take in—or not to be able to take in. Like the size of the flight deck. How big was it? Impossible to say. It was as big as it was. There was nothing to compare it with. Well, there were people and jets and tons of other equipment, but there was nothing bigger than it—except the sea and sky which always serve to emphasize the lack of everything else. So in tangible, physical terms the carrier was the world and, as such, was a world that was the case.

I was not the first writer ever to set foot on an aircraft carrier. One of my predecessors had been hauled up by a sharp-eyed editor for fiddling his expenses. Such things are not unheard of in journalism but this time the editor had him banged to rights: claiming taxi fares during the period when he'd actually been on board the carrier.

'I know,' said the journalist. 'But have you seen the *size* of these things?'

I'd heard another story, about two brothers working in different sections of the same carrier who didn't set eyes on each other during the seven months of their deployment. It didn't matter whether stories like these were factually correct: the truth to which they attest is that carriers are *big*. Big as small towns. Big enough to generate stories about how big they are.

The flight deck is not only big; it is also overwhelmingly horizontal. That's what the carrier has to be: a pure and undisturbed length of horizontality, one that remains that way whatever the sea pitches at it.

The teams in their colour-coded jerseys and float coats reminded me of a time I'd visited the Chicago Stock Exchange with the traders in their colour-coordinated blazers on the trading floor, all gesturing and clamouring in a repeated daily ritual that made perfect sense in the consequences of which were potentially catastrophic. Here too the functions of each team were clearly differentiated from one another according to a colour code I did not yet understand—except for the brown shirts. We were on one of the most technological and advanced places on earth but the guys in grease-smear brown jerseys and float coats draped with heavy brown chains, looked like they were ready to face the burning oil poured on them from the walls of an impregnable castle. The combination of medieval (chains) and

sci-fi (cranials and dark vizors) didn't quite cover it, though; there was also an element of the biker gang about them. All things considered, theirs was one of the toughest, roughest looks going. No wonder they stood there lounging with the grace of heavy gun-slingers about to sway into a saloon. Every gesture was determined by having to move in this underwater weight of chain. I couldn't keep my eyes off them. They weren't posing. But in this silent world everyone is looking at everyone else the whole time, all communication is visual, so you're conscious, if you're a guy with a load of chains hanging from your shoulders like an ammo belt, that you're the fulfilment of some kind of fantasy—not a sexual one, more like a fantasy of evolution itself. And they weren't swaggering; there was just the grace that comes from having to minimize effort if a task is to be properly done, especially if a good part of that task involves standing around waiting with all that weight on your shoulders.

The air was an ecological disaster. It was hot anyway, and the heat reared up from the deck, dense with the fumes of jet fuel. Whenever a jet manoeuvred towards the catapults or back to its parking slot or to the elevator there was a wash of super-heated wind, like Dead Valley with an oil-gale blowing through it. We were in the middle of the sea and it smelled like a garage with fifty thousand cars in it, each suffering a major fuel leak.

Critics argue that the First Gulf War and the invasion of Iraq were all about America's insatiable need for oil. What did we need this oil for? To sustain our presence here, to keep flying missions. The whole enterprise reeked of oil. Planes were taking off. The fact that cranials insulated us from the ear- and sky-splitting noise emphasized the tremendous force at work. There was an acute sense of thousands of years of history and refinement—the refinement of the urge to make war and the need for oil in order to do so—converging here.

The purpose of an aircraft carrier is to carry aircraft. Launching and recovering planes is, as Newell had drily pointed out, the name of the game. As a plane prepared to take off, a woman in a green jersey, perched on the edge of a kind of manhole, signalled to other members of the ground crew. Others in green and red signalled to each other with absolute clarity. Everyone was in contact, visually, with everyone else but the jets were the centre of attention, and the pilots flew the jets. All eyes were on the jets. The pilot was the observed of all observers. There was no room for anything even slightly ambiguous. There was a guy near the front of the aircraft, keeping low, making sure he didn't get sucked into the jet intake and two other guys almost behind the wings—the final checkers—each crouched down on the heel of one foot with the other leg stretched out in front, also keeping low, making sure they weren't hit by the jet blast. How Pina Bausch would have loved to have gotten her hands on this scene! And thank God she didn't! (Same with Claire Denis whose film *Chocolat* ends with a lovely sequence of the gestural language of African baggage handlers and whose *Beau Travail* gazes longingly at the bodies and ballet of soldiers in the French Foreign Legion.) For the beauty of this performance was inseparable from its setting and function. The elaborate hypnotic choreography on display was devoted entirely to safety, to the safe unleashing of extreme violence. Violence not just in terms of what happened hundreds or thousands of miles away where the planes were headed, but here, where the immense forces required for launch were kept under simmering control.

Up until a certain point a plane can be touched by members of the ground crew. Then the JBD (Jet Blast Deflector) comes up behind the plane. The plane goes to full power—it is on. Now that one appreciates that the plane, prior to this moment, has been idling, dawdling. The

wing flaps are jiggled. Final checks. Thumbs-up between the pilot and the last two members of the ground crew who scurry away, staying low. The plane is flung forward and in seconds is curving away from the end of the carrier, over the sea. In its wake there is a wash of steam from the catapult tracks. After a few moments the catapult shuttle comes back like a single hare at a greyhound race. A minute later another plane from a neighbouring catapult blasts into the sky.

With the first part of the launch and recovery cycle completed there was an interlude of quietness, though even during the busiest times there had been a lot of hanging about; at least one of the coloured-castes of crew were lounging about in a state of relaxed alertness. John Updike asks, in one of his books about art, if there is such a thing as an American face. I don't know, but looking at the guys on the flight deck, unfaced by cranials and vizors, persuaded me that there is such a thing as an American walk. Even overweight cops have it: an ease and grace, a subdued swagger. It used to be identified mainly with race—a black thing—but now it seems a cultural and national quality.

Through the dazed silence we walked towards the stern of the boat to better observe the planes landing, past the side of the island where a sign warned, quite reasonably:

BEWARE OF
JET BLAST
PROPELLERS
AND ROTORS

All of which were gathered here in great abundance. Over this warning, like the sign of a giant casino, was the white number 77. There was much to see, lots of it on an enormous scale—but my escort was always tapping me on the shoulder, pointing to hoses, pipes, hooks, chains and other small things that could be tripped over.

We could see the planes high up in the blue distance, plane-shaped specks coming round in an immense circle. As they approached the carrier their wings were all the time tilting slightly, first one way and then the other, adjusting, compensating. Three arresting wires—thick as rope but thin and wiry in this context—were stretched across the rear of the deck. On the port side of the boat, very near the back, the landing signal officers—all pilots themselves—communicated detailed refinements of approach to the pilot.

The planes thump down and then, rather than slowing down—as one might reasonably expect—immediately accelerate to full power in case they miss all of the arresting wires and need to go round again, as had happened to us on the Greyhound: a bolter, in the argot. If the hook catches then the arresting wire snakes out in a long V and brings the plane to a halt. The dangers of the operation are numerous and evident. The plane can crash into the back of the ship, slide off to port and into the sea or—worse—slide starboard into the island, people, trucks and other parked planes. Every variety of mishap was featured in a book I'd been looking through on the flight to Bahrain: *Clear the Deck! Aircraft Carrier Accidents of World War II*. Unused missiles would shake loose from under wings and be launched into the island. The force of the landing would be so great that a plane already damaged by gunfire would break in two, the back half snagged by the arresting wire while the front part barrelled on down the flight deck. In the worst crashes the plane would become an instant fireball but—and this is what rendered the book engrossing rather than simply horrific—it was often impossible

tell what would happen to the pilot. The plane comes crashing down and, amid the flames, the pilot scrambles out of the cockpit and rolls down a wing to safety. The plane smashes into pieces and the pilot walks away, shaken but otherwise unhurt. But a relatively innocuous-looking crash results in his being killed instantly, still strapped to his seat.

The metaphor that kept coming up in pilots' accounts was that landing on a carrier was like trying to land on a postage stamp (one of the guys I met later on the carrier would use exactly that phrase). Which takes some doing, of course, but if it's daylight, with a steady wind, perfect visibility and the sea flat as a pond it looks fairly routine. But then you throw in some variables: a storm, cross-winds, rain and pitching seas so that looking through the Plexiglas of the cockpit is like being on a trawler in the North Sea. Or maybe one engine gone. Or both engines are gone. Or you're blinded by gunfire, unable to see anything, taking instructions from a plane on your wing and the LSO, nobody raising their voices, just 'Right rudder, right rudder'—until the last moment when the LSO shouts, 'Attitude, attitude, attitude!'

You can see footage of this stuff, along with a lot more escapes and disasters—recent and vintage—on YouTube. A plane that seems on the brink of stalling, almost vertically, right over the carrier, somehow takes wing again. A malfunction means the navigator has partially ejected and so the pilot has to bring the plane in with his colleague riding on the remains of the cockpit as if at a rodeo. Hearing the LSO yell, 'Eject! Eject! Eject!', pilot and navigator obey instantly, only to see their plane gather speed and fly gamely into the distance like a horse whose jockey has fallen at Becher's Brook.

If all goes as planned, the plane comes to a halt, the tail hook is raised, the arresting wire released and comes snaking back, helped on its way by crew members who prod it along with brooms to discourage it from even thinking of taking a break. Within seconds it's back in place, kinked and quivering somewhat from the strain of its existence—understandable in the circumstances—but otherwise ready for the next tug of war with an F-18.

We trooped back down the stairs, took off our float coats and cranials. In the course of my stay I moved constantly and quickly between the numerous levels below the flight deck, often barely conscious of where I was (didn't have a clue most of the time), but the difference between the flight deck and everything below was absolute. It was like entering the dreamtime up there, a martial realm of the supersonic, where the sky gods G and Negative G had constantly to be assuaged and satisfied. Launch and recovery may have been organized as they were in the interests of efficiency and safety but it was a religious ritual too—a ritual from which it was impossible to return as a non-believer or sceptic even if one didn't understand exactly who was doing what or why (actually that qualifier binds it *more* tightly to traditional religious ceremonies).

Now it was time for another, more ordinary ritual: lunch in the Ward Room reserved for commissioned officers. My anxieties about what life on the boat would be like had not been confined to whether I'd have my own room. I was also worried about the scran, the scoff, the grub. I'm the worst kind of fussy eater. I don't have any allergies and aside from seafood I don't have any generic objections to food types, but I have aversions and revulsions so intense and varied that I struggle to keep track of them myself. I grew up hating all the food my parents cooked, was always being told I didn't eat enough to keep a sparrow alive. That's probably why I'm so skinny, why I joined the lunch queue with some trepidation. Trepidation that turned out to be entirely justified. It was all revolting. The smell of cooked meats and the jet fuel they were cooked in made me heave. There were salads, yes, but with lettuce represented and disastrously symbolized by the iceberg they were deeply dispiriting. I'm not a principled vegetarian but I was on the look-out for a cooked vegetarian option which I found in the form of spaghetti with tomato sauce. It was almost cold while it was in the serving containers. By the time it had sat on a cold plate for thirty seconds and I had sat down with the snapper, Newell and some friends of his from the Reactor Room, any residue of heat had gone. It was not a pleasant pasta but at least its unpleasantness was all in the moment of consumption; the unpleasantness did not turn into the gag-inducing aftertaste of the big meats. A veteran of assignments in the world's most troubled and least appetizing spots, the snapper tucked in with gusto. He was hungry, the snapper, and he was adaptable. For dessert I had a couple of plums and a yoghurt which, coincidentally, was plum-flavoured though it didn't really taste of anything. It wasn't much of a meal but the sparrow had been kept alive, the wolf from the door. I had got through lunch but I was already—after just one sitting—calculating how many more meals I would have to get through in the course of my stay.

After all I'd heard about the size of these carriers I'd assumed there would be an abundance of facilities. Ping-Pong tables—and the prospect of a table-tennis league—were such a certainty that I'd actually brought my paddle with me. Badminton seemed likely and, though this might have been a tad optimistic, I even had hopes of a tennis court. The reality is that a carrier as crowded as a Bombay slum, with an aircraft factory—the hangar bay—in the middle. The hangar bay is the largest internal space on the boat. It's absolutely enormous—and barely big enough for everything going on there.

Just past the hatch through which we entered a dozen men and women in shorts and singlets, all plugged into their iPods, were pedalling away on exercise bikes or running on treadmills. It was like stepping into a future in which the technology of renewable energy had advanced to the point where their efforts powered the whole ship. There was even a statue of someone running: George Bush Sr., of course, in flying suit and kit, scrambling for his plane back in the Second World War when he was a Navy pilot. Fuel tanks were hung from ceilings and walls. Every bit of space was utilized in the same way that my dad, on a smaller scale, maximized space in his garage (never trusting me, as a result, to park his car there after I borrowed it). The planes were nuzzled up close to each other. Mechanics were clambering all over them, with special soft moccasins over their boots to prevent damage. Each of the planes had a pilot's name stencilled just below the cockpit where, in the Second World War, Japanese flags or swastikas would indicate kills. But the fact that Dave Hickey had his name here did not mean that it was Hickey's plane for his exclusive use (which made me wonder what the point was of having his name there at all; I mean, when you write your name on the milk carton in the fridge of a shared student house you do it to indicate that it's *your* milk, that it's not for anyone to take a big gulp of or to pour over a bowl of Crunchy Nut Corn Flakes just because they've got the munchies).

I was working my way through this analogy-reminiscence when we were met by Commander Christopher Couch whose businesslike pleasure it was to take us on a tour of the massive—and massively crowded—space. He was in his mid-forties, I guessed, and his hair was cut like everybody else's on the ship. I always like to be in the presence of people who are good at and love their jobs—irrespective of the job—and if ever there was a man in love with his job it was Couch. He began by explaining that the E-2C Hawkeye had an eight-bladed prop and that this had only recently been made possible by advances in materials technology. Made sense. I thought back to First World War biplanes with their twin-bladed props and maximum speeds slightly faster than a bike's. I had no chance to make notes; there was so much to see and it was impossible to keep up with all the model numbers, engine parts, fuels, tools and spools, functions and processes and purposes, many of them dissolving in a torrent of acronyms.

'Wow,' I said during a brief lull in Couch's litany. 'This is the most A-I-E I've ever been in. Excuse me?'

'Acronym Intensive Environment,' I said, feeling both smart and stupid at having risked

first joke in a new place.

‘That’s a good one,’ said Couch in a tone suggesting that there are only bad ones.

Light was pouring in through huge spaces on either side of the hangar: the port and starboard elevators that took planes up to the flight deck. The sea was racing past, a film of light and sky projected from within this vast and silhouetted auditorium. I would like to have watched more of this nautical epic but we were not here to admire the view. Couch’s recitation of specs and engine parts, however, was occasionally punctuated by mention of something I could humanly relate to: the beach. It came up several times, this beach, but he wasn’t taking a detour into how he liked to spend his vacation—he was talking about ‘the long logistical pipeline back to the beach’. Ah, he was still on the job; the beach was the mainland where spares were kept and more complex repairs could be made. I started calculating ways in which I might incorporate this bit of metonymy into dinner-party chatter back at London beach. I couldn’t think of a single way, but I liked the logic of his usage, the way it performed two tasks simultaneously. It made the deployment seem like a pleasure cruise (if you love your job this much it is sort of a paid vacation) and it also did the opposite: made everything that happened on the mainland seem like buckets-and-spade stuff, a holiday, compared with the serious shit that went on here.

We came to the other end of the hangar, near the very back of the boat, the fantail as they call it in the trade. This was where the jets’ engines were tested. At night, a full test would take about eight hours, and it was a source not of amazement but of incomprehension to Couch that anyone would contemplate missing a single minute of this epic performance without concluding that their lives had been thoroughly wasted.

The beach came up again, at Carrier Control Approach, which we visited after dark.

‘Back at the beach, the field is always there,’ said one of the guys, looking up quickly from his screen. It sounded like the beginning of one of those coded radio announcements from the BBC to the French Resistance ahead of D-Day. Either that or a line from a draft of a Wallace Stevens poem. There followed a long interval of silence before whatever was happening onscreen allowed him to resume and complete. ‘Yeah, their field is always there. Where our airport moves.’

There were sixteen people in the CCA, all zipped up in cosy military jackets, monitoring what looked like a billion dollars’ worth of computer screens and radar maps. It was icy as a Vegas hotel and dark as a nightclub. There was even some UV light, emphasizing the white, ghostly, snowy stuff that hung from the ceiling in readiness for Halloween. The temperature had to be kept low because of the equipment but it also meant that there was no chance of anyone dozing off and taking a nap. Just trying to keep warm meant the brain was in a state of constant high alert. The darkness brought out the greens, purples, yellows and reds of the screens. There was an air of relaxed and chilly attention. Someone was drinking coffee from a clear mug with a slice of orange in it—a strange drink. A supervisor stood in the middle of the room, looking over people’s shoulders, checking to see how they were doing their job. He was a trainee supervisor and someone was watching over him too. Thus the naval hierarchy towers over the boat like the island over the flight deck. I started to wish I’d worn a thick pullover and wondered what coffee with a slice of orange tasted like. But mainly I was glad I had no one looking over my shoulder, checking on how I was doing my job.

We’d got here half an hour before the birds would start landing. As the time for recovery drew near the atmosphere changed, from attentive to highly focused. With the screens full of data I was reminded, as I had been on the flight deck, of the financial markets, this time with some kind of crisis beginning to make itself felt: a plunge in the FTSE 100, a devastating surge in the NASDAQ. I’d never been in an environment where a slow intensification of concentration was so marked. One of the screens went down. Came back again. I’d heard of the stress of air traffic control, had seen *United 93* in which the controllers manoeuvred aircraft from the path of the hijacked planes. This was more stressful in a way—‘our airport moves’—but the number of planes was minimal compared with however many thousands that came barrelling in over London every day, hoping to squeeze into a landing spot at Gatwick and Heathrow without circling for hours in a rush-hour holding pattern. The controllers had a distinct way of speaking to the pilots. Firm enough that the idea of non-complying did not even occur; relaxed enough that no one would feel they were being bossed around (thereby engendering the reflex urge to do the opposite).

Plasma screens displayed numbers, data and radar info; others transmitted the action on the deck as planes came thumping down in the dark, one after another. The picture quality was roughly that of CCTV footage in a Stockwell off-licence. Everything went like clockwork—a phrase which, in this context, sounds several centuries out of date. The birds were all back.

And would stay back till morning. That's right: flight ops finished at about 2140! Newer had known this all along. The talk about planes coming and going like Lionel Richie, all night long, had been just a joke. Everyone was home and would stay home. We were going to have a quiet night in. There would actually be a long interval of what passed, in these parts, for silence.

Lights Out—at ten p.m.—was preceded by an announcement broadcast over the whole ship: a little parable followed by a prayer. It was a nice way of rounding off the day and binding the ship together, those sharing a dorm with two hundred others, officers in a room for six, and the privileged few who had rooms to themselves, who lay in their bunks in the tireless knowledge that if they woke in the night needing to pee the basin was only a yard away.

There may have been no jets landing but my stateroom was regularly engulfed by new sources of industrial clamour that earplugs were powerless to keep at bay. I was jolted awake throughout the night but always managed to get back to sleep, partly because the default silence was anything but. It wasn't even *white* noise, more like dark grey shading into black. Air, water, heat, coolant and—for all I knew—ammunition or loaves of bread went whistling, howling, surging, clanking, pouring and thumping through the gates and alleys of the carrier's life-support system.

Breakfast in the Ward Room was a fried reek of congealed eggs, bacon and other horrors avoided—if not ignored—in favour of cereals, tinned fruit and yoghurt. After that we went right to the source, to the kitchens where it had all been prepared. Showing us round was Warrant Officer Charles Jakes from New York City. He was African American, and had spent twenty-five of his forty-four years in the Navy. In a way that I was becoming accustomed to, Charles ran—as opposed to walked or strolled—through a description of his mission and his routines. He was in charge of 112 cooks and 180 food attendants, serving seven places to eat on ship. Increasing quantities of the stuff served in these venues were pre-prepared rather than cooked from scratch (which saved money and time, cut down on staff and accounted, in part, for why meals on the boat were less than appetizing).

The idea, Charles explained, was to go forty-five days without running out of anything. And twenty days without running out of fruit and veg. He took us into a freezer—the size of a Manhattan apartment—and talked us through its contents. Eight thousand pounds of chicken, five thousand pounds of steak, four thousand pounds of hamburger. Waiters in American restaurants always employ the first person singular when announcing and describing the day's specials. 'I have a lamb casserole with a radish reduction,' they will say, as though the interesting-sounding confection has been summoned into existence by his or her descriptive efforts alone. In Charles's case this grammatical habit took on gargantuan proportions.

'I aim to eat my way through everything on the boat,' he said. 'So, going back to the US, I got a million dollars or less left for the last forty-five days.' It made Paul Newman's boast in *Cool Hand Luke*—'I can eat fifty eggs'—seem pitiful, the equivalent of ordering a single soft-boiled egg on toast. Speaking of eggs, we moved from freezer to fridge to gaze at 230 boxes of them, which made a total of 575 dozen eggs. This looked like a lot but I calculated that added up to only just over one egg per person; hence Charles's eagerness to offer reassurance. 'These are not the only eggs. Most the eggs are frozen. These here are just back-up.' Good to know.

En route to one of the store rooms, we passed another chill box which was actually the morgue. 'Ain't nobody in there at the moment,' he said. 'And if there was there'd be a guard outside.' That was good to know too.

As we entered the store room Charles warned that it was in a seriously depleted condition. At the beginning of the deployment stuff would have been piled so high we would not be able to see over the stacks. Now, near the end of deployment which, he hoped, would clean the place out, they were rarely more than four feet high.

First thing we saw was a low-level expanse of popcorn ('they just love popcorn round here'). Beyond the popcorn were six-pound tins (like big pots of paint) of Country Sausage Gravy, Great Northern Beans, Victory Garden Pork and Beans, Popeye Leaf Spinach, Heirloom Dill Kosher Sandwich Slices ...

Like a mother whose son has turned up unexpectedly Charles kept stressing that levels were this low because we only had forty-five days at sea left, that, relatively speaking, the

was almost nothing to eat.

Before moving into the bakery we donned little paper Nehru hats. The bakers, from New York, Texas, Chicago and California, were lined up to meet us. They bake eight thousand cakes a week, not counting the ones made for special ceremonies in port (epic cakes iced in the colours of the American flag and the flag of the host country). Our visit was not ceremonial exactly but they had prepared some samples for us. I love cake, cake is my popcorn, and I was glad to be able to tuck in as though it were the snapper, not me, who was always picking at his food like some high-achieving anorexic. It was incredibly hot in here—hot, as Philip Larkin remarked in a different context, as a bakery.

‘You’re not troubled by the heat in here?’ I said.

‘Uh-uh,’ said one of the bakers. ‘Sometimes it gets pretty hot.’

‘This is not hot?’

‘This a really cool day.’

The visit was as near as I was ever likely to come to being a touring politician or a member of the royal family. I actually found I’d adopted the physical stance of the monarch-in-the-age-of-democracy (standing with my hands behind my back) and the corresponding mental infirmity: nodding my head as though this brief exchange of pleasantries was just about the most demanding form of communication imaginable.

From the bakery we moved into one of the real kitchens: the heart (attack) of the whole feeding operation where Charles resumed his narrative of singular endeavour: ‘I aim to prepare maybe four thousand ...’, ‘When I’ve eaten twenty-five hundred pounds of ...’ I’d gotten it into my head that this was not just a figure of speech, and now found it impossible to shake off the image of the genial and willing Charles scarfing his way through piles of meat, potatoes and vegetables, gorging his body beyond its performance envelope, a Sisyphus scrambling up a mountain of food, a calorie-intensive reincarnation of the Ancient Mariner. In its way it was a far more impressive feat of solo perseverance than even the pilots could achieve.

All around were boiling vats as round and deep as kettle drums. A lot of meat was being prepared, plastic bags stuffed full of barbecue chopped pork.

‘Hmm, smells good,’ I said, instinctively remembering that nine times out of ten the most charming thing to say in any given situation will be the exact opposite of what one really feels. The truth was that the smell was a sustained and nauseated appeal on behalf of the Meat-Is-Murder Coalition or the Transnational Vegan Alliance. But what can you expect when you’re in the middle of the ocean with five thousand hungry bellies to stuff, most of them needing plenty of calories to fuel their workouts at the gym?

Our tour concluded with a look at another store room. Notwithstanding Charles’s warnings about the paucity of supplies, the acute lack of any sense of shortage gave rise to a form of mental indigestion. It was reassuring looking at these tins, seeing them stacked, knowing one would not—I would not—be sampling their contents. But what a disappointment if the carrier sank and treasure hunters of the future discovered not the sunken gold and jewels of galleons from the days of the Spanish Armada but thousands of cans of gravy and kosher sandwich slices: the lost city of Atlantis re-imagined as a cut-price hypermarket that had slipped beneath the waves.

For the duration of my stay the carrier remained a three-dimensional maze of walkways, stairs and hatches but at some point we always ended up back in the hangar bay—the second most interesting place on the boat (after the flight deck). We passed through there straight after our tour of the kitchen and would do so later the same day, after dark, when it was illuminated by a pale yellow light (less visible from a distance). Now the Arabian sun was peeking through the open expanse of the elevator bay, eager to get a glimpse of whatever was going on in this outpost of industrial America.

Like a buffalo brought down by a lion who then summons the rest of her pride to tuck in, an F-18 was being pecked, prodded and taken apart by a gang of mechanics and engineers. They swarmed over it, drawing metallic entrails from the fuselage, digging into its cockpit and burrowing away in the bowels of the engine. They did this with the utmost care, many of them wearing the soft suede or chamois over-shoes I'd noticed earlier—the heavy industrial equivalent of carpet slippers—to prevent damage to the plane's delicate skin. The concern was reciprocated: little padded pouches were tied to the sharp edges of the plane's fins and wings so that heads were not gashed as people hurried by.

A brown-shirted woman was perched on the wing, cross-legged as if at a festival of futuristic archaeology, concentrating closely on the all-important part she was unscrewing. Having taken the component out of the wing she was now coating it with some kind of grease, glue, anti-freeze, lube or whatever. I apologize for the discrepancy between the precision of the task and the imprecision of my description of that task. I have never liked anything that involves engines, oil or fiddly intricate work even though it is, in a way, in my blood. My dad served his apprenticeship and worked at Gloster Aircraft Company, where one of the first operational jet fighters, the Gloster Meteor, was built. Some days he and his workmates would eat lunch outside, munching their bread-rationed sandwiches, watching planes take off and fly around the shirey skies. (My parents were much on my mind while I was on the boat; my mum had died four months before I came on board; my dad would die, quite suddenly, three weeks after I got back.)

A couple of planes away a fuel cell bladder was being replaced. It looked like a cross between a black python and a massively deflated paddling pool. The work was being overseen by a civilian who, like almost all the civilians on the boat, was ex-military (a Vietnam vet from helicopters, search and rescue). If you met him in the street you would guess straightaway that he had been in the military: a directness, a strength (physical, yes, but also of purpose and identity), an instinct for straight talking that is manifest even when (especially when) silent. A young woman was curled up yoga-ishly on the wing of this plane, too, replacing something. The fact that she was wearing a cranial and an oil-smeared brown jersey made her eyes even more luminous. I was glad to have an excuse to talk with her. She wiped her face with the back of her hand, as you do when your fingers are oily. It wasn't exactly a gender-reversal thing going on, but the essential choreography of the scene was being acted out in garages throughout the world: a woman being told what's wrong with her

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