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## Life on the 'Big Stick'

Area aviators, sailors and Marines  
serve on the U.S.S. Theodore Roosevelt



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# Life on the 'Big Stick'

Area aviators, sailors and Marines serve on the U.S.S. Theodore Roosevelt

*Speak softly and carry a big stick, and you will go far.*

- President Theodore Roosevelt

THERE ARE MORE THAN 500 SAVANNAH-AREA MARINES AND SAILORS serving aboard the aircraft carrier U.S.S. *Theodore Roosevelt*, which has been in the thick of the air campaign since mid-October.

I spent three days with the troops aboard ship last month on assignment with WSAV-TV, and learned the depth of commitment these men and women have to waging the war on terrorism.

The *Roosevelt* – nicknamed "Big Stick" by the crew – is halfway through a previously scheduled six-month cruise. Its air wing contains one squadron of F-14 Tomcats, the two-seat fighter/bomber made famous by the movie *Top Gun*. It also hosts three squadrons of F/A-18 Hornets. All three squadrons are home-based at the Marine Corps Air Station in Beaufort, S.C.

The *Roosevelt* steams in circles in the

Arabian Sea south of Pakistan; from there, it's just a short flight to Afghanistan. The ship is on a nighttime schedule: planes launch around sundown, and return at dawn. Consequently, the crew eats breakfast around eight p.m., lunch at midnight, and dinner around four in the morning.

(In case you're wondering, *Roosevelt* time is nine hours ahead of the Coastal Empire and Low Country.)

Planes from another American carrier, the U.S.S. *Carl Vinson*, bomb Afghanistan during the day, allowing the coalition to keep up the fight 24 hours a day.

I reached the *Roosevelt* via a COD—that stands for "Carrier Onboard Delivery"—that carried me and three other reporters on a three-hour flight from US Navy 5th Fleet headquarters in Bahrain, a small island nation off the Persian Gulf coast of Saudi Arabia. The COD is the carrier's mail delivery plane, making the



THE THINKER: A catapault crewman during a rare quiet moment on the flight deck

rounds between ship and shore daily.

As soon as we screeched to a sudden halt on the ship's deck, my colleagues and I were assaulted with a flurry of noise and activity. The flight deck has been compared to a NASCAR pit – with bombs and missiles added. It's fast-paced, loud, and extremely dangerous.

Dozens of crewmen and women move around quickly between parked planes and racks of ordnance, wearing colored turtle-neck jerseys that signify their role in

this complicated ballet of man and machine.

Fuelers wear blue, aircrew chiefs wear brown, and catapault crew wear green. No one speaks; commands are communicated with a complicated series of hand gestures.

A Beaufort Marine Corps fighter pilot who asked to be identified only by his call sign, "Joey," told me, "what goes on on the flight deck is unlike anything I've ever seen. It involves minimal conversation, and people just know where they need to be and where their job is.

Crew members also wear "float coats" – which are essentially uninflated life jackets – helmets called "cranials" that include ear protectors, and plastic goggles to shield their eyes from flying debris.

The rubberized deck is slippery from fuel and oil, and because the ship is turned into the wind to add lift to launching aircraft, there's a constant twenty-five or thirty-mile-per-hour wind blowing across the deck. Couple that with the sensory deprivation that comes with the ear protectors and goggles—and walking around on the flight deck feels like roller skating into a hurricane.

But things don't really get interesting on the flight deck until the airwing is launching or "recovering" (the official word for landing) the aircraft.

The planes need the full force of their own engines to take off—plus extra help from the carrier's nuclear reactors. The



TWO BROTHERS: Zak, left, is an officer aboard the carrier *Carl Vinson*. Josh, right, is a Beaufort Marine fighter pilot on the *Roosevelt*. They were allowed to visit each other on Thanksgiving, when the carriers' commanders allowed Zak to fly over to the *Roosevelt* to see Josh.

reactors heat steam, which is used to power three catapults that help fire the planes off the deck. The planes taxi up to the catapults with their wings folded up like bats. Then the wings fold down and lock into position, and a square piece of water-cooled decking called the jet blast deflector rises up on hinges behind the plane.

As a crewman locks the catapult shuttle onto the aircraft's front landing gear, the pilot brings the engines to full power, salutes the crew, and settles in for the ride. An officer called a "shooter" uses the plane's weight—close to 45,000 pounds—to calculate the amount of force needed for take-off.

Shooter Bill Schlemmer told me, "the last person I look at is the pilot, and if he's not shaking his head, and then I hit the fire button... it's up to God's hands right from there."

For the pilots, it's an incredible ride—zero to 150 m.p.h. in two seconds. Bill Hamilton, the commander of one of the Beaufort-based F/A-18 squadrons and a veteran fighter pilot said, "your engines are at full throttle, you salute the catapult officer, signaling that you are ready to go flying, and he essentially fires the bullet, fires the catapult, and you are thrown into the air at the speed your airplane needs to be."

The bombing missions over Afghanistan last an average of four to six hours, then the plane's return to the *Roosevelt*. The aircraft are guided in one at a time, and the pilots must hit the deck hard, so they have enough power to lift off again if they miss one of the four steel arresting cables that bring them to a stop.

Each pilot must snag one of the cables with a tailhook hanging from the bottom of the plane. It's the exact opposite of the launching process, but no less jarring.

Hamilton told me, "it's like slamming on the brakes in a car that has incredible brakes, and you're thrown forward and hang in the seatbelts until the airplane comes to a stop. There are no roller coasters like that."

As the planes glide in, the pilots train their eyes on a set of colored lights called the "meatball," which help them come in at the right angle. The color of the lights changes with the angle of approach, so the pilots can tell if they're too low or too high.

A Beaufort pilot who goes by the call sign "Boyle" told me, "there's not a lot of room for error out here on the flight deck. You don't wanna be so low that you hit the back of the ship, or so high you have to go around again."



**DAWN PATROL:** Every day the flight deck must be checked closely for small pieces of debris that could get sucked into a jet's intake

It's not an easy job, and it's even tougher at night. Things happen quickly during recoveries; I counted one plane landing every thirty seconds during one early morning sequence.

When I asked what life aboard ship is like, one crewman asked me if I'd ever seen the Bill Murray movie *Groundhog Day*. Murray's pitiful character is trapped like the subject of a twisted *Twilight Zone* episode, consigned to live the same day over, and over, and over again. The movie's not far off the mark when it comes to carrier life.

The crewmen — most below twenty years of age — work twelve- to eighteen-hour shifts, seven days a week. They sleep in tiny bunks with barely a foot of headroom between them, and rarely see

daylight unless they take a smoke break or spend their working hours on the flight deck.

If you think the 1,100-foot-long carriers look huge when you see them on TV, try spending six months aboard one. To make matters worse, the *Roosevelt* and its crew haven't enjoyed a single port call since they left the states in September—and none is scheduled anytime in the foreseeable future.

But the troops seem motivated by the chance to take the war to the terrorists, something most Americans wish they could do. And their families seem to stand behind them.

A *Roosevelt* wife named Allison told me, "they're getting to do what they trained to do, finally. This time there is a purpose for their deployment. I know they are gone for a purpose. They are doing such a good job out there."

Another wife named Vicki said, "on September eleventh, a lot of people lost spouses, and they're not gonna come home. Ours will come home. You miss him, and you want him home, but it's the life you chose. And now, at the situation where we're at now, you're almost honored for him to be out there."

The crew does enjoy occasional breaks from the action. The captain stopped all activity on the flight deck for "steel beach day" a little more than a month ago. The crew played ball and grilled steaks and burgers on deck, and some even jumped off the deck and swam in the Arabian Sea.

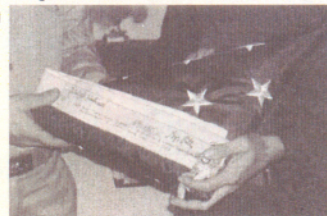
It was a short break — but worked wonders for the exhausted sailors and Marines. I witnessed another brief respite from the continuous activity: Thanksgiving dinner, served at 4:00 a.m. the day after Thanksgiving.

The galley crew worked for more than eighteen hours preparing the feast, which included 3,000 pounds of turkey, 5,000 servings of stuffing, and hundreds of pies. USO entertainers also stop by.

While I was aboard ship, the

*Roosevelt's* crew was visited by the Miami Dolphin cheerleaders, and David Keith, one of the stars of the new carrier movie *Behind Enemy Lines*. But even on these special days the sailors and Marines still had to climb up to the flight deck and do

their jobs. The war doesn't take a break for anybody. ▶

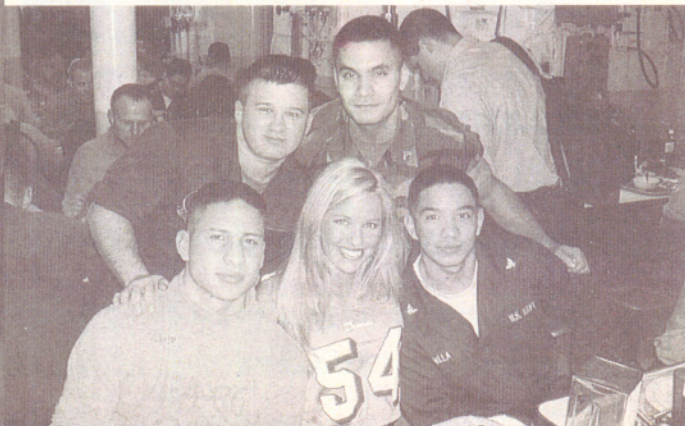


**Now on the *Roosevelt*, this flag flew at Ground Zero on September 11**

If you'd like to learn more about Michael Jordan's visit to the *Roosevelt*, visit [www.wsav.com](http://www.wsav.com). There you can see a WSAV Special Presentation, "Life Aboard the U.S.S. *Roosevelt*: America's Big Stick," in streaming video format.



**A sailor's hearty Thanksgiving feast**



**A Miami Dolphins cheerleader brightens up the place**