

## Life Aboard an Aircraft Carrier

"Inconceivably noisy," says the author, but a blast.

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*Geoff Dyer*

British essayist and novelist Geoff Dyer became writer-in-residence on the USS George H.W. Bush in 2013. In *Another Great Day at Sea*, Dyer—in his words the oldest, tallest, and most self-conscious person on the boat—shows life on a carrier as it's never been seen before, from the view from Vulture's Row to the captain's daily address, which invariably begins: "It's another great day at sea..."

I spent my time on the USS George H.W. Bush 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.

Asked, nine months earlier, if there were "somewhere unusual and interesting" I'd like to be writer-in-residence, I didn't hesitate: Sir, an American aircraft carrier, sir!

It had to be American: circumstantially, because these days we—the British—don't even have a carrier; personally, because of the accents, the audible symptoms of the top-to-bottom, toff-to-prole hierarchy that is so clearly manifest in the British military. To have locked myself away on a British aircraft carrier—if one had existed—would have been to have condemned myself to being on a shrunken version of our island kingdom. Sitting in on a U.S. ship, on the other hand, would be like staying in a small town in America (albeit one organized along unusually clear hierarchical lines), surrounded by American voices, American friendliness, American politeness, American Americans.



The beautiful and complicated ballet of moving jets on the carrier at night. (Chris Steele-Perkins)



An exercise session on ship. The deck, Dyer writes, was "bursting with straining flesh and grimacing biceps." (Chris Steele-Perkins)



A foreign-object-debris walk: akin to police officers looking for clues. (Chris Steele-Perkins)



An F/A-18 Hornet about to make contact with the George H.W. Bush. (Scott Kelby ©2013)

After five minutes of knee-knock and stoop-walk I arrived at my stateroom, the Vice-Presidential Room in a special little VIP corridor of "guest suites."

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. 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 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.

After all I'd heard about the size of these carriers I'd assumed there would be an abundance of facilities. Ping-Pong tables were such a cert 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 is as crowded as a Bombay slum, with an aircraft factory—the hangar bay—in the middle.

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"Two-man planes are a pilot and a piece of self-loading baggage," said one of the pilots (call sign "Disney"). I wanted him to expand on this but another pilot (call sign "Lurch") was taking me up to Vulture's Row to watch the launch and recovery through his night-vision goggles.

I'd been up there—a catwalk high up in the island—once before, in daylight, and it was like being a vulture perched on a telegraph wire, waiting to see what happened to the other birds. I could hear the voice of the Air Boss but, with my earplugs in, could not make out what he was saying.

Even without night-vision it was a lovely night: moon tilted over on its back, streaks of cloud, sea glittering, oil wells burning orange in the distance, jets roaring off the deck. In the darkness the violence of flight ops was drastically intensified. The jet blast was a solid core of flame burning with such ferocity and force that it seemed the Jet Blast Deflector would melt like reinforced chocolate.

After a pilot had landed, he parked and climbed down the step-ladder to greet the members of the flight deck crew who'd been responsible for his plane. They all huddled round. He fist-bumped each of them. The last thing he did, before disappearing below deck, was to walk to the front of his plane and pat it on the nose, exactly as if it were a horse.

I wanted to speak again with Disney. When we met up, however, his shaven-headed confidence had turned to tact and diplomacy. The earlier crack about two-seater planes was just good-natured ribbing, he said.

"But the thing about solo flying is that your mistakes are your own," he explained. "You're as good as you're gonna be on that day. It's just you, on your own in the office, with the best view on the planet."

"D'you actually get time to look around?"

"When we were taking off from the Indian Ocean into Afghanistan, it was an hour and ten minutes driving up the boulevard, as we called it. There was plenty of time to look around then."

I'd heard that during eventless flying time like that, pilots sometimes plugged in their iPods and rocked out in the stratosphere. Disney was unable to confirm or deny such stories, but he did speak of the routine of flying in terms that I would hear several times more in the course of my stay.

"You're flying a video game. You're a weapons-and-sensors operator more than you're a pilot. The plane is easy to fly. Flies itself almost." And then, with no change at all in his low slow drawl, he began to talk about a different order of experience.

"You're flying at night, on a gorgeous, clear night. At 30,000 feet. With the night-vision goggles on it's like flying through space. You see stars that you never thought you'd see before. Especially if you're over water—that's like flying in deep space."

So there it was, still intact despite the technological advances and laconic delivery: the lyricism of night flight as first and famously evoked by Saint-Exupéry.

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The person explaining the part played by ordnance and showing us around one of the magazines on the boat was Lieutenant Commander Dave Fowler from north Florida, just south of the Alabama state line. He was in his mid-40s, with hair buzzed close up the back and sides (i.e., he had the same haircut as almost all males on the boat who weren't shaven-headed or bald). He'd joined as an enlisted man, made chief petty officer in '96, and been commissioned in 2000.

"Ah've had a blast," he said.

The truth is that Dave was still having a blast. He seemed like he might explode with efficiency and zeal. He reeled off bomb types and missile names, smart bombs that could be dumbed down and dumb bombs that could be smartened up. Whatever you wanted a bomb for, chances are he could get one to do it. He introduced me to his colleague Jim, who had an obvious biological advantage over Dave: shaven-headed and huge, he was actually built like a bomb. He didn't work in ordnance, he was ordnance.

As Dave talked, a number of ratings in red shirts—mag rats as they are known—were maneuvering bomb parts on trolleys across the room. Some of the shirts had IYAOYAS stenciled on them.

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"The aviation ordnanceman's motto is 'Peace Through Power: We Are the Arms of the Fleet,' " Dave said. "But because of the close-knit camaraderie of the red shirts that is probably more visible than any other rate that's in the Navy, someone came up with the slogan IYAOYAS: 'If you ain't ordnance you ain't shit.' "

Jim picked up where Dave had left off, further embellishing the IYAOYAS creed.

"If a plane's not carrying ordnance it's a dang pleasure craft. If we didn't have ordnance this boat would just be a floating platform for a bunch of fancy, overpaid video guys putting on an airshow."

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In two days I would be gone. On my penultimate morning I went up to Vulture's Row to watch the surge and return of planes. One of the chiefs I'd had lunch with a couple of times was already up there.

"How ya doing?" he called out.

"I'm great, thanks," I yelled back. "How about you?"

"Sun's shining, wind's blowing, jets are flying," he shouted back. "Doesn't get much better than that!"

Another great day at sea.

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